

## what it is to be a thin crescent moon

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# **what it is to be a thin crescent moon**

by [middlemarch](#)

## Summary

If they began this way, how would they end?

## Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

# Chapter 1

For all that she was an assistant cartographer, Alina had no idea how many more miles from the Fold they'd covered when they were attacked a second time. After the General and his Grisha had dispatched the marauders with as brutal an efficiency as she'd ever seen, she'd been swept up and onto the Kirigan's black stallion, holding on to a bit of rein as if that was what kept her seat and not Kirigan's arm wrapped tightly around her waist. Her First Army training had included very little time on horseback, but she could tell he was a ferocious rider, willing to ride the horse lame if it meant they arrived at Os Alta even one second sooner, with no concern that the horse would balk at any jump or throw them off, his attitude not of confidence but of conviction, sure of himself and the beast as Alina was sure the sky was blue, which was one of the few things she remained sure of after the devastating, abortive trip through the Fold, the revelation of her abilities, her attempted murder by the Fjerdans and the rescue she'd just survived. She could still feel the Fjerdan's life-blood tight and dry on her cheekbone. There had not even been a moment to drag her hand across her face before Kirigan had grabbed her and started for the horizon.

There had been impossible speed and the impossible iron of his arm around her and the impossibility of light beneath her skin. The air became wind and the wind stole her breath; when she closed her eyes, she saw Mal's face as the carriage pulled away and the Fjerdan with his lip curled and that appetite for her death in his irises, the washed blue of a pale dawn, and felt sick, nausea more recognizable than the light she evidently held within herself. Her eyes burned, but it was better to keep them open. She wished they would stop but that would mean starting again, its own particular horror; she wished they would arrive at the Little Palace and she dreaded it, the beginning of a new life, the definitive end of who she had been: Alina Starkov, assistant mapmaker, orphan of Keramzin. She had no idea who the Sun Summoner was, would be, and it was clear she was expected to, the way Kirigan had expected some other answer to his question *What are you?* before he'd cut her open to find the truth. She was precious now and worthless and it had been easier before, when she'd only been little but a person, instead of vast and incomprehensible.

There had been an instant of relief when the first arrow struck Kirigan, the horse slowed by the shock to a canter instead of the endless gallop. The General pulled her closer against him, canting his body to shield hers.

"We'll outrun them," he muttered into her hair, kicking the horse as a goad. "I won't let them touch you."

There was no answer to make. She could smell rosemary and myrrh in his kefta and the tang of blood beginning to overlay his sweat. A second arrow struck him and a third; he made a low sound that was oddly like misery and she turned her face to see the assailants behind them, wild Fjerdans with their bright hair streaming, the bronze of their buckles gold in the sun. They rode easily, their horses fresh, and made some vicious ululation as they aimed their bows.

“They’re close,” she said. If he asked her to call the Sun forth to blind them, to halt their pursuit, she would not know how without Mal to save. The fourth arrow struck and she felt Kirigan’s breath on her temple, the exhalation he had not been able to control.

“This stops now,” he said as if to her. She opened her mouth to protest or explain, but he wheeled the horse around, shocking the Fjerdans as much as Alina. His black cape swirled around her but not before she saw what he did, the Cut less elegant this time, more akin to an axe thrown. She felt the power swell in him and then go all at once as the Fjerdans fell from their mounts, carrion in want of vultures. Kirigan urged his horse towards a stand of trees, ones Alina had no name for, trees that were the beginning of a vast forest.

“We’ll have to shelter somewhere tonight,” he said. “I beg your forgiveness, Miss Starkov. I cannot get you to Os Alta today. Not as I am.”

“Can I help?” she asked. She meant, are you going to die? and somehow, he knew that and knew that she hadn’t said the words aloud. He made a sound, the darkest laughter she’d ever heard but she could recognize pain, even in someone as removed as the Darkling General.

“I need to rest. A day, maybe two. There is a place I know, not far from here, we’ll go there,” he said.

“You’re sure you can still ride?” she asked.

“I thank you for your consideration,” he said, a little wry. “I assure you, riding there is going to be more manageable than walking. I won’t let you fall off the horse, don’t worry.”

“I wasn’t worried about falling off the horse,” she snapped.

“You should be,” he said, the laughter less dark, though she still heard the hurt. “They don’t train mapmakers, excuse me, assistant mapmakers to ride very well in the First Army.”

“No, we don’t get the same training as the Grisha,” she said. Nor the food, the uniforms, the silk tents and tea-chests of all sorts of things, nothing that would be wasted on ordinary folk fighting for their country.

“We’ll fix that,” he said. It took her a few moments to realize he was only speaking of her, not the inequalities between the two Armies, the use of the First Army as fodder for the wars, so many lives so cheaply held.

“I don’t deserve special treatment,” she said.

“Of course you do. You are Grisha. And you are the Sun Summoner. My Sun Summoner,” he answered softly. They were riding more slowly into the shadowy woods, the stallion picking its way through the rougher terrain and he was holding her more loosely with his injured arm. Still, she knew he wouldn’t let her go and that was beginning to be something she relied on.

\*

The place was a step or two up from a hovel, a small wooden cottage Alina expected an ogre might have abandoned as being too rude and tumble-down to bother repairing. How Kirigan

knew of its existence was a mystery. She'd dismounted gracelessly enough though she managed not to fall, her tailbone and thighs aching from the unaccustomed horseback riding, but let Kirigan brace himself against her as he got down; she knew he wasn't resting his full weight on her but she felt the cost to his strength in his hand gripping her shoulder through the torn red kefta she wore. She trusted the horse wouldn't wander too far off from its master and walked with Kirigan through the heavy door which was unlatched, thank Sankta Lizabeta. Neither of them could have kicked it in.

It was not like some cottage in a fairy story, grander within than the exterior had promised—there was little enough, a table and two chairs, a bench before the hearth, a squat chest, and tucked in the corner, a bed without any linens. The chest held only a few cups and dishes, an iron pot, no wadded up blankets or sheets, no old clothes. It was dusty, the windows dim with grime, but there were no obvious mouse-droppings or animal nests. They were out of the wind and safe from the threat of the cold rain Alina had smelled on the trees.

Kirigan made his way to the bed and sat. He could not rest until she attended to his wounds and Alina bit her lip imaging what he'd say when she told him to take off his clothes, what she'd do to tend to injuries without any medical supplies, not even clean bandages or water. *Needs must, girl, get on with it* she heard in Ana Kuya's astringent tone, for once a tonic.

"I'll have to get those arrows out before I can do anything else," she said into the air. It was daunting to say them to his face, though he'd held her in his arms and saved her life twice-over. It struck her that he was beautiful and that it was likely wrong to think that about the Darkling; that the pain of his injuries made him more beautiful and it was definitely wrong to think that about any man.

"Yes, you will," he said. "Did you think I'd argue?"

"I don't have much experience with Generals, but I know they're not fond of taking orders," she said and he laughed.

"No, they're not. But now, I'm no General, with no Army to lead and no Fold to cross," he said.

"No? Should I call you Kirigan then or Darkling?" she asked, surveying his back. The Fjerdan arrows were a curious make, not long as Ravkan ones were, closer to a dart, with a wicked blade for a point and barbs to make removing them a second wound. Trust the Fjerdans to make something worse than a bullet. She didn't understand how he'd kept riding—the first shot had hit his shoulder, but the others had pierced lower, much closer to his lung and one was dangerously near his kidney. What could she call a man who survived such an attack, destroyed his enemies and kept her safe from everything except the soreness of an inexperienced rider?

"Aleksander," he said. "My name is Aleksander Morozova."

"All right, Aleksander," she said and pulled the first arrow from his shoulder. "That was the first arrow. Three more and I'll be done."

“You needn’t narrate for me,” he said, biting off the last word as she worked on the next arrow, its barbs cruelly effective, blood soaking his black cape some darker shade.

“It’s for me,” she answered. “I don’t know what I’m doing, any more than I did in the Fold.”

“Then all will be well,” he said. “I trust you, Sun Summoner.”

“Alina,” she corrected.

“Alina,” he repeated.

\*

He nearly fainted with the fourth arrow, the worst injury as she’d suspected. He didn’t make a sound, just began to collapse and she caught him before he could fall off the bed. She laid him down on his side, then fumbled at his throat to unfasten the collar of his cape and the kefta beneath. He roused enough to cooperate when she started tugging at the sleeve of his kefta and she saw the thin linen shirt he wore below was sodden with blood. She needed something to dress the wounds but the cottage had yielded nothing and though there were saddle-bags on the horse, she doubted she’d find anything useful. She opened the kefta she wore but it was unlined wool; she yanked the tail of her own shirt from her breeches, thanked the saints it was too long, and tore enough to make a barely adequate binding. She’d stopped narrating, as he called it, and just wrapped the linen around him though the process was awkward as shearing a young ram or getting any drunk soldier onto their own bedroll. The red kefta she rolled to brace against his back, to keep him from rolling over and loosening the bandages, resting his weight on the wounds and pressing them against the meager mattress and the tough ropes supporting it.

“Thank you,” he said, his voice raspy as if he had screamed through her care instead of being nearly silent.

“It’s nothing. I’ll try to get a fire started, you need to stay warm—”

“No. There cannot be any sign of us, not now. I can’t protect you if they find us tonight,” he said. It was not an admission made lightly and she had to stifle the unexpected urge to stroke his bearded cheek in some sort of consolation.

“I’ll take first watch,” she said. The chairs in the cottage would make a poor bed but that was best when she was trying to stay awake.

“No,” he said. “You’ll freeze, the weather’s changing—we’ll be lucky if it doesn’t snow. Lie down with me.”

“Lie down with you?” she repeated, almost as astonished as when he’d shoved up her sleeve and drawn the knife against her skin.

“Tonight, we are only two soldiers, two lost Summoners in exile,” he said softly. “We must share the little we have to stay alive until morning—water, food, warmth.”

“There’s nothing to eat or drink here,” she said.

“But there is a way to stay warm. Lie down with me and cover us both with my kefta and cape,” he said.

“Are you ordering me, General Kirigan?” Alina asked.

“No, Alina. I’m only asking that you trust me a little more, Aleksander, not Kirigan or the Darkling even,” he said. “I only want us to make it through the night. I promised you safe passage to Os Alta and the Little Palace. You are Grisha and I promised to be at your side, to protect you, not just from the Fjerda or the Shu-Han.”

“This doesn’t feel right,” she said, but she spread the kefta and the fur-trimmed cape over him, then lay down next to him, curled on her side with her back against his chest, just as it had been during their long ride. She said the words aloud but she knew they weren’t true. Not as they should be. There was no fire in the hearth, no stub of a candle flickering in a pool of wax, but pale blue moonlight made its way through the windows. The moon was a sickle, a weapon, and she wondered what it meant to them when she was supposed to command the sun and Aleksander the shadow; what did the moon mean to two such as them?

“You’re warm,” he said, his voice unguarded, surprised, drunk and tired from pain, the power he’d spent to keep her alive, the power he spent to heal from wounds no ozkazat’sya could have survived.

“That’s the sun, isn’t it?” she replied. “The sun is always warm.”

“Sometimes the dark is warm,” he said. “Sometimes, it’s a refuge.”

“Go to sleep, Aleksander,” she said.

“I have been waiting a long time for you,” he murmured, drowsy as a boy.

“I’ll be here when you wake up,” she said. She was bound to him now, there was nowhere else for her to go, not the wide world over, but that was not why she said it and not what she meant. He breathed more easily behind her, his hand on her arm. It would fall to her hip and slip around her waist, just as when they were riding together. Would they share a dream this long, cold night? She closed her eyes and let the moon watch over them, the mistress of light and shadows neither she nor Aleksander could trouble.

## Chapter 2

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

There was a frost overnight, everything outside limned in white. The dawn sky was the glazed hue of a Shu tea-cup and it was so cold in the cottage Alina could see her breath in the air, as if she held only clouds inside her and not the sun. She woke curled up on her side, her face tucked against Aleksander's chest, his arm around her and she was pleasantly warm despite the bitter weather, the empty hearth.

She was pleasantly warm because he was burning up. His face was pale but with the hectic flush a fever visible above his beard. The shadows beneath his eyes were darker, his lips slightly chapped. And she had nothing to give him-- no heartening broth, no tonic, no salve for his poorly dressed wounds. Not one drop of water.

She had only been Grisha for a day but she had been an orphan of Keramzin for the whole rest of her life and she meant to make that count. For his sake as much as her own. She slipped from his embrace and got up, debating with herself about whether to take back the red kefta she'd made into a bolster or to suffer the bite of the cold without it as she searched for fresh water and anything she could forage.

"Where is she?" he said, coughing. He was reaching for her beneath the cape, his movements slow, obviously painful. "Blessed Mokosh, they took her—"

"It's all right," she said. He opened his eyes, such soft dark eyes and she could tell when he recognized her. He started to sit up, then gave a low, anguished cry and she quickly put her hand to his cheek. "Lie down, I'm here."

"Hurts," he murmured.

"I know. I'll be back very soon, I'll bring some water, that will help," she said. She wished so much to be telling the truth.

"No," he said with an unexpected degree of force. "Not safe—"

"I'll be very quick and careful," she said. It wasn't a choice; he was very ill but they both needed water to live and she could not get to Os Alta by herself, nor could they stay forever where they were. No one was coming to help them.

"You'll get lost," he said.

"No, I won't. I was a mapmaker, I can find my way," she said. He was tiring, starting to slur his words a little and his accent was stronger, something she didn't recognize.

"There's a spring, east," he said. "A cache, by the tamaracks. Take the red kefta, keep you safe."



“Good. I’ll go now, you sleep. I’ll be back before you wake,” she said.

“I’ll come for you if don’t,” he said, taking hold of her wrist. “Waited for you, such a long time, Alya.” Was it only his fever talking, that made him call her by the short, sweeter version of her name, the one to be used by a sweetheart? If it was not his illness, what could that mean? His eyes closed and she could tell he was falling back into an uneasy sleep, still with her wrist in his grasp. She freed herself and picked up the red kefta where it lay beside him. When she put it on, she felt the heat of his body around hers again.

“I’ll be right back,” she said softly, took the pot from the chest, and then walked out the door into the woods.

His directions were simple but accurate. Alina walked due east, squinting into the morning sun that she felt at the back of her neck and down her spine, and within a few minutes, found herself in a cluster of tamaracks, a small, clear spring trickling into what seemed like a basin of rock. She filled the pot and the empty flask she’d found in the saddle-bag on his stallion, wishing for a pair of buckets or even her First Army canteen which had held more than the two vessels she had combined. Finding the cache took a little more work and it helped to have the spring nearby so she could wash her hands after grubbing in the dirt with a jagged piece of stone as a makeshift shovel, but it yielded veritable treasure: dried lentils and sealed jars of honey and salt, all of which she stuffed in the secret inner pocket of the red kefta. They were lumpy, destroying the line at the hip, but for good cause; she wondered what the Grisha expected to carry with them. She had said to Aleksander she would not be long and she’d need to make a second trip to get water for the horse, so she only paused to pluck a handful of dzherrabai leaves when they caught her eye, wadding them up to shove in the pocket of her trousers. She remembered the scent of Ana Kuya’s still-room and the tinctures that had dazzled her when the setting sun poured through the windows and lit the bottles. She had honey enough to make a tisane Aleksander could drink with the herb. Perhaps it would be enough to weaken his fever and start to knit his wounds. She wished she could run back to the cottage but she couldn’t risk spilling any of the water. She walked as quickly as she could, murmuring *I’ll see to you next* to the horse and then went inside, hoping Aleksander might have made some miraculous recovery in the interim or would at least be sleeping more comfortably.

Neither was true.

Aleksander slept, but not comfortably, restless under the makeshift covers, muttering words and phrases she had a hard time understanding, some of them in a Ravkan dialect she didn’t know, all of them pained. Fearful. She set down all the supplies she’d brought back and went over to him, laid a hand on his forehead the way Ana Kuya had always checked an ill orphan, feeling herself purse her lips in the same manner. If anything, the fever was higher than before and he cried out, a little broken sound, one that a child might make when they had no expectation anyone would come. She needed to make him the tea with the dzherrabai but it would take time to heat the water and simmer the leaves; she decided to mix some honey and water to get him drinking. There was a battered tin cup in the chest she filled halfway, then sat down beside him and tried to rouse him.

“Aleksander, wake up.” She kept her voice low, hoping not to startle him. Even ill and wounded, his power was palpable and she didn’t want him to lash out and injure either of them. He didn’t respond so she tried again, a little louder, but it didn’t make a difference. She touched his shoulder and when he grimaced in pain, his cheek, repeating his name.

“Aleksander, wake up for me now...”

“Alya?” he said, looking at her as if she were a dream. “You—”

“Yes, I’m here,” she said. “I want you to drink some water. Then you can rest again while I make you some tea.”

“You’re all right?” he asked. He reached out his hand almost blindly, his movements clumsy. Yesterday, he’d slid off his galloping stallion with a preternatural grace and killed the Fjerdan poised to murder her, using a single, devastating strike. She caught his hand and felt how he trembled, how he burned.

“I’m fine. Let me help you take a sip, don’t want to spill,” she said. She put her hand behind his neck and lifted his head, knowing it would have been easier if she could put her arm around his back but that his wounds wouldn’t allow it. She brought the cup to his lips and tipped it slightly, watching him taste the water and then the sweetness of the honey, taking a swallow and then another until it was empty. She set the cup beyond the boundary of his cape and started to lower his head down, stopped by his hand at her wrist, holding her tightly.

“Thank you,” he murmured.

“It was nothing,” she began.

“Thank you for coming back to me,” he said even more softly. “Solnyshka.”

“I’ll be right here,” she said, not trying to pull away. It worked—he released her wrist and let his head drop back down. She wished she had a pillow for him, a pot of chicken soup bubbling on the hearth, a Healer ready to treat every wound, a palace full of Grisha to defend him and the riches of the Tsar’s coffer at her disposal to buy whatever rare sweetmeat would tempt him. But their world was very small—a tin cup, a cask of honey, a handful of yellow leaves in her pocket. A hearth waiting for a fire to be laid, a pane of sunlight on the floorboards. He took a long breath and she saw the flutter behind his closed eyes, the softening of his chapped lips. Aleksander was dreaming.

It was time for Alina to work.

## Chapter End Notes

From "Who Were the Slavic Gods of Kievan Rus:" Mokosh, the only female in Vladimir’s pantheon of gods. Mokosh is the goddess of fate and the protector of women in childbirth. She also watched over the weaving and spinning. Mokosh enjoyed

spending her time dressed as an old woman, wandering around and visiting people in their homes during Lent.

Zveroboy is a bright-colored plant with yellow leaves. It was widely used in Russia to help workers recover after a hard day toiling in the fields. But its medicinal properties do not end here: Zveroboy was brewed to treat kidney and gastrointestinal diseases and to help get rid of vascular spasms and colds of all sorts. For example, Cossacks used it for treating wounds and cuts - hence the herb's historical name is dzherrabai, which means "wound healer." Tea is not made from Zveroboy on its own because it's very poisonous and may provoke a strong allergic reaction. Herbalists recommend brewing one teaspoon of Zveroboy together with honey, mint, lime flowers, and dried wild strawberry berries.

Everything Alina finds in the cache are foods which can last for an indeterminate amount of time without spoiling, so you can try to decide for yourself how long ago he left them there. My son was very disappointed I hadn't included wine.

## Chapter 3

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“You lit a fire,” Aleksander said after the first swallow of the tisane. She’d been liberal with the honey since there were no currant leaves or berries to cut the bitterness. He hadn’t balked at the flavor but the heat. “It’s dangerous—”

“It’s dangerous to be here alone with you so sick and not give you any medicine,” she said.

“I won’t die,” he said, then grimaced while coughing, a harsh, hacking cough she knew enough to worry about.

“You don’t know that,” she said, angling the cup at his lips so he’d drink again. She could see the working of his throat, could smell his scent under the fragrance of the steeped herbs and honey. When was the last time anyone had told him he didn’t know best? “I’m not willing to wait and see.”

“Why not?” he asked. He meant *why do you care* but he wouldn’t say it. When he was more lucid, he wouldn’t call her Alya. She was beginning to understand him.

“What are you?” she asked. “That’s what you said to me and I told you. A junior map-maker of the First Army. You were the one to tell me I was something else and honestly, it doesn’t mean that much to me.”

“It should mean everything,” he said.

“Everyone always wants to decide who you are,” she said. “I’m a half-Shu chit, orphan of Keramzin, the mapmaker not-as-good-as-Alexei. Now you tell me I’m the Sun Summoner, I’m Grisha.”

“And you are,” he said softly. “My Sun Summoner—”

“I’m just Alina. I’m a person who pays attention, even if no one’s paying attention to me. I don’t like to see someone suffer without trying to help them. I wish I were a better artist,” she said. As she’d thought, he’d become drowsy as they spoke, the tisane starting to work or his fever rising. There was more foraging to do once he fell back to sleep, a few snares to set. She wasn’t anything like the tracker Mal was but she was good enough with her hands, could set a snare, clean a rabbit, tell the good mushrooms from the bad, find the last few berries.

“I wish you were a better cook,” he said, taking the last of the tea, the bitter dregs. Alina chuckled a little.

“I’ll try. Sleep now,” she said.

“Don’t be gone long, Alya,” he said, his eyes closed, shifting beneath his black cape. “*Pozhaluista*.”

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“Smells good,” Aleksander said. Alina glanced over and saw his face in profile, pillowed on his bent arm. The black linen made him look like an agate kame’o, somehow achingly young.

“It’s the wild onion,” she said. “I was lucky to find it. It’s not much though, just some of the lentils with the onion and salt. I’m sure you’re used to finer.”

“Maybe you’d be surprised,” he said. “I don’t care for the rich syllabubs and suckling pig they favor at the Tsar’s table.”

“Well, no suckling pig or milk-fed veal is going to get caught in the snares I set, so you don’t need to worry about the menu until you’re back in Os Alta,” Alina said.

“Until we’re back,” he corrected. “And that’s not what is served at the Little Palace. The Grisha eat like the otkazat’sya.”

Alina snorted, tried to disguise the sound stirring the lentils in the pot, clattering the spoon against the metal. It didn’t work.

“You don’t think so?” Aleksander asked.

“I don’t know what the Grisha eat in Os Alta, but with respect, I doubt you eat like otkazat’sya,” Alina said. “I’ve been in the First Army and seen the rations of the Second.”

“It’s been a long time since anyone has challenged me, but it seems to come easily to you,” he said. He sounded pleased and when she looked over, she saw a small smile on his face. Meeting him after the abortive crossing of the Fold, she would not have thought to see him so and not ever when he looked at her.

“It wasn’t beaten out of me as a child, so I’ve learned to hold my tongue,” she said. “To bite it.”

“You were beaten?” he said.

“Not more than most,” she said. “Well, a little. But I could run fast and Ana Kuya, the woman who was in charge at the orphanage, she wouldn’t bother coming to find me. When I got back, she was too busy to switch me more than a few times.”

“No one should hit a child,” he said flatly. “Any child.”

“I survived,” Alina said. She would have expected him to speak so of someone disobeying the Tsar or attacking the Grisha, not about what he was clearly envisioning, Alina as a little girl no one cared for very much, being hurt by the woman paid to raise her.

“Is that how you got the scar on your forehead?” he asked.

“When did you—”

“Last night,” he said. “You must have gotten cold.” She’d woken in his arms, her face against his chest, close enough for him to take note of every imperfection. She felt herself flush.

“No,” she said. “I don’t remember getting that scar. I guess I had it when I came to Keramzin. The lentils are done now, do you feel up to trying some?” she finished, aware of the words tumbling out, that he’d know she was embarrassed, not fully grasping why.

“A little,” he said. “I’m not very hungry.”

“That’s the fever,” Alina said. “Try. You don’t have to finish it.”

“All right,” he said. She doled out a modest portion into a bowl then went over to the bed. He wasn’t going to be able to feed himself and she braced herself for some prideful bluster or aloof withdrawal.

“Let me help you,” she said, filling the shallow well of the spoon and letting it cool.

“I didn’t mind,” he said, confusing her a little, until she realized he was speaking of the night. “I wanted, I want to keep you safe. When you were close, when I could see your face, I knew you were—I knew you felt you were.”

The spoon was balanced between them. Alina made herself look at it, the sheen of the metal in her hand, the dissipating steam from the pottage. It was as if he’d cut her again with the silver talon ring, but instead of light streaming forth, he’d looked within and found the shadow behind the sun. She guided the spoon to his lips and watched for him to part them. When she looked up, his eyes were on her and the expression there reminded her of their first meeting but there was something else there, something she might call tenderness.

“More?” she asked.

“A little. It’s good,” he said, offering the praise for the meal. Intending it for her.

He’d taken three more bites and then turned his face away. Alina finished what he’d left and what was in the pot. She wasn’t about to waste one single bean, especially not when it seemed Aleksander was getting worse not better. He’d drifted off shortly after eating but he’d been restless. She tried to move around the cottage quietly, putting away the few objects, sorting out what she’d been able to find foraging, going through the items in his saddle-bag, most of which other than a candle-stub were unknown to her and could not be put to another obvious purpose. It didn’t take very long and then she was left to her own devices.

By all rights, she should have felt terrible. She was stranded in an isolated cottage with minimal supplies, her ability to find food, water, anything the woods had to offer limited by the possibility of being attacked, again, with a desperately wounded man to care for without much beyond her two hands. She’d been taken from everyone and everything she’d ever known and thrust into a new world, one where she was special in a way that made her a target of entire countries but her putative gift had yet to reveal any benefit besides allowing a few people to survive a crossing of the Fold.

And yet.

She didn't feel terrible. She felt worried and concerned and frustrated, hungry and tired and bored, but she wasn't lonely, though she missed Mal something fierce. She wasn't dull or aimless. When Aleksander was awake, they talked as she'd never talked to anyone before, certainly not as she would have expected to talk to General Kirigan, the Darkling. When he slept, she watched over him if she could, leaving him as briefly as she must, and when she slept, he was beside her, familiar as if she'd known him for a lifetime. It made no sense at all and when his dark eyes were open, she saw he understood it. Shared it. He'd said she was Grisha, the Sun Summoner and perhaps he was right, or maybe there was something else between them that had a different name or no name at all, but it didn't feel terrible at all.

At least not until she woke within an hour of falling asleep in the chair she'd dragged next to the bed, his low moan the alarm that roused her. When she touched his face, she was startled to find his fever had risen far higher than it had been, too high to rely on water or a tisane or the depths of early morning for it to fall. She had to lower it and she had to look beneath the dressings on his wounds and see if any of them, despite his assertion, had turned mortal.

Lighting the candle would have been easy with matches or a flint and tinder, but she had none of those. It would have been difficult if she had tried to think about how to light it with the power she carried but it wasn't, because she didn't think, she only touched the wick between her thumb and forefinger and felt, frantically, that it must ignite because she needed to see him, to save him and what good was being a Sun Summoner if she couldn't even do the smallest science? The flame she kindled was steady, a pale gold that cast few shadows, ideal for her purpose.

She took the cape off him and the half-ruined kefta, then had to decide how to examine his back; to wake him was a cruelty and she wasn't sure she could do it anyway, but she couldn't get the shirt he wore off without taking his arm from his sleeve and after the ride, the day and night spent with him, she knew how much bigger and stronger he was than she. She managed to roll him from his side to his stomach and pulled up the hem of his shirt, unable to keep herself from noticing how his dark hair curled at the nape of his neck. She shook her head a little and then lifted the dressings. The wounds close to his shoulder were healing, the flesh knitting well, without any discharge or inflammation but the lower wounds had begun to fester, though at least they had not blackened. She let the shirt fall down and mixed a paste from some of the salt and honey, wishing for calendula, then brought the salve back and began to apply it.

"No, no, hurts, please stop," he cried out at her touch. Her hands kept moving, as gently as she could, unwilling to take away the slight chance the poor salve offered, blinking away the tears filling her eyes.

"That's it, just a little more, almost done, you're doing so well, Aleksander," she soothed. His back muscles were tense beneath her palms and she saw the strain in his neck, the angle of his jaw. "It's almost over, Sasha," she murmured, guessing someone must once have called him that, when he was a little boy, one who should never have been beaten, or loved by a woman who saw how soft his dark eyes could be, how his voice sounded when he sang to himself.

"Luda?" he said. The sudden, shocked hope in his voice was like a knife.

“It’s all right, Sasha,” Alina said. Whoever Luda was, he had loved her very much. “I’m here.”

“No, you’re not,” he muttered, then coughed. Cried out again, bereft. Alina’s hands were still. She knew she had to put the dressings back in place but she wanted to give him a moment’s peace. Just one. She closed her eyes. He’d had such a look of awe and marvel when the light had spilled forth from her skin and there was so little she could do for him. She wished so much that being the Sun Summoner meant anything now. It seemed impossible that it could and impossible that it didn’t. She felt a surge of something—frustration, eagerness, fear, tenderness—and then she heard him sigh.

She opened her eyes. The cottage was dim, the candle barely flickering but Aleksander’s skin was lit as if the sun shone upon it on a warm summer day, when boys would hurry to shuck off their shirts and play in the river. His wounds were still there but not quite as terrible, his fever still present, but not as dangerous; some shadow had been driven off from him. There was no explanation for what she was doing, what was happening, but it didn’t seem to hurt him and she had a curious sense of calm, could not keep herself from smiling, a small secret smile she wouldn’t have tried to hide from Aleksander if he looked at her. But he only sighed again and slept.

She did not hear him say *Alya* when she lay down beside him, the candle blown out, his black cape drawn over both of them like one of his shadows. She did not feel him reach for her. But she did not move away when he pulled her close or when he breathed her name *Alya solnyshka* into her loosened hair, over the crown of her head.

## Chapter End Notes

Sir Wallis Budge alleged that the noun "Cameo" apparently comes from Kame'o, a word used in kabbalistic slang to signify a "magical square", i.e. a kind of talisman whereupon magical spells was carved.

According to my Googling, "Pozhaluista" is the most polite way to say please in Russian. Native Russian speakers feel free to correct me!



## Chapter 4

“We can’t stay here any longer,” Aleksander said, trying to get himself sitting upright and failing, cursing in some unrecognizable dialect under his breath. He’d taken half a bowl of lentils and drunk a full cup of water, so he’d decided he was healed.

“Well, we are,” Alina said. “Because you’re in no condition to travel. There’s no way I could keep us both on the horse. The Fjerdans wouldn’t have to do a thing. We’d kill ourselves.”

“I can ride,” he said, almost petulant.

“You can’t get up from that bed without holding on to the chair,” Alina countered.

“I can,” he argued.

“You’re barely able to piss in a pot!” she said as he flushed and pressed his lips together tightly. “That’s right, I’m crass and crude, that’s who your precious Sun Summoner is, an ill-mannered orphan, a First Army soldier who’s not going to beat around the bush and flatter you and risk your life and her own for your pride and stubbornness!”

“No one has spoken to me like that in a very long time,” he finally said, very quietly, his face turned towards the window. “No one has dared.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, pushing a lock of hair behind her ear, one that had come free from her plait. “It’s just that I—”

“You’re not wrong,” he interrupted. “I cannot risk your life because it’s killing me to stay here. I promised to keep you safe, even if I’ve done a miserable job so far. I shouldn’t compound my failure.”

“You’re awfully hard on yourself for someone who took out at least five Fjerdans intent on murdering me and got nothing but life-threatening injuries for his troubles,” Alina said, going over to help him into something like a sitting position, the red kefta wedged behind him. She sat down on the edge of the mattress, her hands held loosely in her lap. “You haven’t failed me. I’m still alive and so are you, even though I don’t really know how.”

“You should be safe at the Little Palace now, beginning your training, dressed and fed and tended as the Sun Summoner deserves to be,” he said. “But that’s all still possible—and it’s because of you.”

“It’s not just because I made you a barely medicinal tonic and smeared honey on you,” she said, blushing herself when she heard how the last words sounded. “If there’d been any kvas in the cache, I could have used that.”

“What a waste that would have been,” he said. “Because what you did was more than any salve or ointment. You know that, don’t you?”

“I don’t know anything—you mean about summoning, right? It’s magic, I didn’t—”

“It’s not magic. It’s science. Or rather, Small Science. We do not conjure from nothing. We manipulate that which already exists around us,” he said. His eyes were bright, his hands gesturing gracefully as he took in the air, the light, the empty hearth, the dust motes glittering as they tumbled.

“You make it sound so easy,” Alina said.

“A bird makes flight look easy. But it was born to do so,” he replied.

“When it’s ready,” she said.

“But you are ready,” he said. “More than I could have imagined. How did you light the candle? You kindled it without a match, didn’t you? How did you break my fever, keep me from falling into a coma, without proper medicine or treatment, yet you did it. You are a Summoner but you can control fire, you can heal, though you were only expected to command light.”

“I don’t know what I did. Or how,” she said.

“But I do,” he said. “I know something of it anyway. If we are to be stuck here, the least I can do is begin to teach you, though I’m not as fine an instructor as Botkin Yul-Erdene. I am not as strict as some. You needn’t fear being birched.”

“I don’t know,” she said, staring at her hands. Once they were in Os Alta, she had expected her training to begin in earnest, but here, in this cottage in the middle of nowhere, for all that Aleksander was grievously wounded, it had felt like a reprieve; she could simply be Alina, not this other person, creature, that was now expected of her by the world. By Aleksander. She felt him take her wrist in his grasp lightly. She knew he was waiting for her to lift her eyes to his, that he would wait as long as she liked.

“You might like it, you know,” he said. “To use your power without being driven to it from desperation. You haven’t felt that yet, what it is to coax the light to your bidding, to feel it eager for your direction.”

“That doesn’t sound like science,” she said.

“You’ve managed to get to the crux of a thousand year’s worth of philosophical debate on the nature of Grisha power and merzost,” he said wryly.

“What’s merzost?” she asked.

“The making at the heart of the world,” he said and she thought, everyone knew he was the Darkling, the most powerful Grisha in Ravka, the General of the Second Army, the Tsar’s adviser, but only she knew he was a poet. Luda had known, Alina was suddenly sure of that, but perhaps no one else, no one living.

“That sounds like something above my pay grade,” she said and he laughed.

“It’s not a place to start, that’s true. Though I believe it’s what you did to me. For me,” he said. “Last night, you made light within me, an... alteration. Something finer than mending.”

“It wasn’t that big a deal,” she said. Lied. Which was stupid, because they both knew she was lying, so what was the point?

“I was very far away and you called me back,” he said. “You called me Sasha.”

“You didn’t know it was me,” she said. She didn’t ask *who is Luda?* but he saw the question in her eyes and how she hadn’t spoken it aloud.

“Yes, I did,” he said. “You’re why I came back, Alina.”

# Chapter 5

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

As it turned out, several things were true.

Aleksander was a very good teacher.

He was not a very good patient.

Alina was a very good nurse.

She was not a very good student.

And they were running out of lentils.

“You cannot expect to master everything in a day, Alina,” Aleksander said. He’d said this in a number of different ways over the hours, as she bit her lip and clenched her fists, narrowed her eyes and once, in a fit of temper that made his lips quirk in a quicksilver smile, stamp her booted foot. He hadn’t scolded her or threatened, used a clipped tone or a cutting one, hadn’t blown out a long breath or rubbed the bridge of his nose in a frustrated exhaustion, any of which reactions Alina would not have blamed him for, not one jot. He’d grown tired, but that was because he was still feverish and she had little to give him besides the end of the lentil pottage. He’d been very kind, very encouraging, and hadn’t once given her any suggestion that he questioned her abilities, only his own in trying to help her use her power.

“You’ve already accomplished more than many of the most powerful Grisha after years of training. If what I am telling you isn’t making a difference, it’s I that am at fault, not you,” he said. She almost wished he would rap her knuckles or call her any of the names that came so readily to Ana Kuya’s tongue. She felt the soft burning of tears held at bay, the tension in her neck from holding up her chin, squaring her shoulders. Any more gentleness from him and she would break.

Alina’s salvation was what a terrible patient he was. She could not keep trying to conjure and collect light, pale as dawn, rich as sunset, when he balked at lying still, cursing as he fumbled while pouring a cup of water, cursing more violently when she insisted on taking off his soaked shirt to dry it in front of the fire. He sulked, bare to the waist except for the bandages she’d wound around him, his cape draped around his shoulders; if she was able to create the glow of moonrise in the corners of the room simply from looking at how beautifully made he was, his broad chest and his narrow waist, the dark curls of his chest hair obscuring the fine tracing of old scars, the hollow at the base of his throat and the crest of his hip, well, she wasn’t about to make a fuss about it. He’d made enough fuss for them both though they both knew the wet shirt would dry and that there were a number of reasons his hand had trembled.

She had to turn the moonglow the color of the tsaritsa's opal diadem for him to stop glowering at her.

He had tried to get up when she said she had to go out and find something for them to eat. She'd scolded him already for a similar attempt, one in which he grabbed the chair beside the bed to keep from falling, but this time, the chair was across the room. Alina had to rush to catch him herself, bracing them both as he stumbled. She wrapped her arms around him, trying to keep from pressing on his wounds, trying to keep him steady and to keep from noticing his bare skin, the weight of him upon her, his hands at her hips, both of them seeking some balance. Both of them aware of the flare of power, the sudden rushing of light and shadow, like the held note of a soprano and basso profundo in a duet, a chord of exquisite beauty.

"M'sorry, Alya," he muttered into her hair. He was trembling and she helped him the few steps back to the bed. He sat down heavily and she fought the urge to stroke his cheek in consolation.

"It's all right," she said. "But you have to see, you still need to rest. And to eat something more than a thin soup made from stretching one sack of lentils. Unless you have a lesson about how I can turn light into chicken pelmeni, lamb plov, and risovaya kasha, I'll have to go back out and see what I can find."

"There's another cache but it's further away, north, about a mile past the dell. There's a stone shaped like a sleeping bear," he said. "I don't want you to go that far."

"But I have to," she said. He pressed his lips together and turned his face away and then she knew, he was ashamed. Ashamed that he was still ill and weak, that he needed her, that he had admitted not only to his need but his desire. *Wanting makes us weak* he'd mumbled in his sleep, as if it was something he'd been told so often he now told it to himself. She reached out to touch his hand, to weave her fingers through his.

"It's far safer than crossing the Fold and I managed that," she said. "I bet it's far safer than going on any cartography mission a junior mapmaker would have been sent on. And maybe once I'm back, I can make something better to eat and do that trick with the ball of light—"

"It's not a trick, Alina," he said. "Making sfera, whether of light or shadow, is a critical skill for a summoner to master."

"It's not a trick," she repeated. "Seems like one to me, but I need to practice more."

"I won't be able to rest while you're away," he said, but it wasn't an argument. He was telling the truth.

"Well, lie down anyway and see what happens," she said. "With any luck, the next time I go out, you'll be able to come with me and we can ride to Os Alta."

"D'you believe in luck, Alina?" he asked and she shook her head.

“Me neither,” he said. “Be as safe as you can. Be as quick as you can. If you’re not back by sunset, I’ll take the horse and come find you, I promise you that, whatever it costs.”

“Aleksander, you’d kill yourself—”

“I couldn’t live through this night alone,” he said.

“You don’t know that,” she argued.

“But I do, Alya. I know it as I know the shadows and the dark,” he said. “Be quick. Be safe. Come home.”

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There was no kvas in the second cache and there were more lentils, but Alina could not be too dismayed because there was more honey and salt, a sack of dried apricots, one of rice, a few strips of dried venison, a pouch filled with grains of paradise and a battered tin that was full of comfits. She tasted one: caraway. She felt rich indeed and then discovered one of her snares had caught a rabbit; it would take some work, but they would eat well and perhaps the meal would begin to truly restore Aleksander’s strength. She walked back at a brisk pace, stopping just out of view of the cottage to clean the rabbit, not wanting to have to leave again to dispose of the guts, not wanting to attract any animal predators to the cottage when Aleksander was already so concerned about more Fjerdans or Shu-Han mercenaries. Mal had usually been the one to dispatch any game they’d caught outside Keramzin, but she muddled through with the dull knife from the cottage, brushing away the loose piece of hair tickling her cheek, her mind intent on the task, her heart filled with relief and gratitude.

Later, she tried to explain to him how she’d felt, how focused she’d been, how distant any other threat had seemed. Later, when he calmed down. Later was very far away when she walked back to the cottage, catching sight of Aleksander at the front window. He’d dragged a chair over and dragged himself across the room to stand there, hanging onto the chair for dear life, unable to accept the humiliation of sitting there, waiting for her but unable to bear lying on the bed. Unable to bear what he saw when he closed his eyes, a thousand terrible fates, the worst the moonless night falling and Alina nowhere to be found, the sun put out. He stood at the window and someone else might have been fooled by his posture, the impassive look in his eyes as he watched for her return, but Alina wasn’t and wished she had a hand free to raise in greeting. She opened her mouth to call out to him but it was too late.

The sound he made was the most human keening she’d ever heard. It might have begun with her name, Alya, the way he said it in the night or when he was most unguarded, but it only began there. Around her, shadows collected, a darkness she’d never known, deeper and more silent than the Fold. *The making at the heart of the world*, he’d said and she was there, in the world’s beating heart, Aleksander’s grief and fury and devastation throbbing around her. She acted without needing to think, sending forth the most tender light, stars and dawn and candle, trying to reach him where he’d gone, where even crying out *Sasha* would not be enough. She was in his arms, all the package and sacks and the trussed carcass of the rabbit fallen around their feet before the shadows he’d made started to fade.

“Sasha, it’s all right, I’m here,” she murmured, the words pressed against his shoulder, the base of his throat. The summoning had done something to him, restored and diminished him

in equal ways, leaving him bare to her.

“There’s blood on your face. On your hands, your kefta,” he said. “There’s blood on your face, Alya.”

“It’s not mine,” she replied, feeling his heart pounding within her own chest. Was this what Heartrenders felt or only Summoners, summoned? She drew back just enough to look at him directly, so he could see her eyes, her lips as she spoke. “It’s not mine, Sasha.”

“I thought you were dying,” he said. “That they’d attacked you and I wasn’t there to keep you safe.”

“I’m glad you didn’t use the Cut to take out the tamarack grove, then,” she said, hoping to bring him back to the reality of the cottage. “It’s not my blood—I snared a rabbit, cleaned it. I’m not very good at it, I’m sorry.”

“A rabbit?” he repeated. He touched the apple of her cheek very lightly and she felt the dried blood there, pulling at the skin beneath.

“Dinner. And breakfast too, if you don’t mind rabbit broth with rice,” she said. “Or you can have stewed apricots with honey. But, please, sit down, won’t you?”

“That’s not—”

“I’m afraid you’re going to collapse. While there is a perfectly serviceable chair right here,” she said. “Please.”

He sat down and she bent down to collect the various things she’d dropped, including the rabbit, which she hurriedly put into the largest pot, the one with the rime of dried lentils clinging to its bottom. She took off the stained kefta and laid it on top of the chest, then pulled the tail of her blouse free, poured a little water on it and scrubbed at her cheek, wiped her hands. She poured a little more water on the linen and wrung it out, letting it hang limp against her hip. She turned back to look at Aleksander and he had a hand across his eyes; she went over and knelt at his side, putting one hand on his thigh, just above his knee.

“I’m sorry I frightened you,” she said. “It was thoughtless of me and I hurt you.”

He let his hand drop and covered hers with it.

“You don’t have to apologize to me,” he said. “Between us, apologies aren’t required. Aren’t necessary.”

“That’s volcra-shit,” Alina said, just as softly as when she’d said she was sorry. She’d shocked him again. “Of course, apologies are necessary. They are more necessary between us because of what we are to each other.”

“Summoners?” he said.

“Friends,” she answered, though it was not the right word. Neither was partners nor allies. Friends was close enough for now, when they were both hungry and raw and his fever was

likely to spike and there was a rabbit to braise with grains of paradise and the handful of cress she'd picked. "When you trust people, you can be hurt by them. If you hurt someone who you care about, you own it, tell them you feel bad about it, because you do."

"You are my friend, Alina?" Aleksander said.

"Aren't I?"

"It seems like a small word," he said.

"Well, I'm not a very big person, so it suits me," she said.

"You are a joy, moya solnyshka." She had never heard him sound more serious.

"You should perhaps wait until you eat the rabbit to decide," she replied, a little flustered. "I might have too heavy a hand with the spice and then where will we be?"

"Right here," he said. "Together, eating your terrible, spicy rabbit."

## Chapter End Notes

Lots of food notes!

pelmeni = dumplings

lamb plov = Russian lamb pilaf

risovaya kasha = rice porridge

Comfits are confectionery consisting of dried fruits, nuts, seeds or spices coated with sugar candy, often through sugar panning. Almond comfits (also known as "sugared almonds" or "Jordan almonds") in a muslin bag or other decorative container are a traditional gift at baptism and wedding celebrations in many countries of Europe and the Middle East, a custom which has spread to other countries such as Australia and Puerto Rico. While licorice comfits (sometimes sold as torpedoes) are multi-coloured, almond comfits are usually white for weddings, but may be brightly colored for other occasions.

A late medieval recipe for comfits is based on anise seeds, and suggests also making comfits with fennel, caraway, coriander, and diced ginger. These aniseed comfits seem to be a precursor of modern aniseed balls. Caraway was the most popular center for comfits in the medieval period.

Grains of paradise: Melegueta pepper is commonly used in the cuisines of West and North Africa, from where it has been traditionally transported by camel caravan routes through the Sahara desert and distributed to Sicily and the rest of Italy. Mentioned by Pliny as "African pepper" but subsequently forgotten in Europe, they were renamed "grains of paradise" and became a popular substitute for black pepper in Europe in the 14th and 15th centuries. The *Ménagier de Paris* recommends it for improving wine that



"smells stale". Through the Middle Ages and into the early modern period, the theory of the four humors governed theories about nourishment on the part of doctors, herbalists, and druggists. In this context, John Russell characterized grains of paradise in *The Boke of Nurture* as "hot and moist."

sfera = sphere, orb, ball

## Chapter 6

“I think I’ll like it even better cold,” Aleksander said. His dish was clean. He had a healthy color in his face and he was sitting comfortably on the bed, the table dragged over to stand between them. “But you must give the recipe to the head cook in the kitchens of the Little Palace.”

“What recipe?” Alina asked, eating the last bite from her bowl. “And you can be the one to tell him, because I think the best seasoning of this dish was hunger. And a breaking fever.”

“If it tasted of anything besides salt and grains of paradise, it was my relief that gave it savor,” he said. “Though I will be even more relieved when we are back in Os Alta.”

“You’ll feel better then, when we get there,” Alina said. She knew they would have to leave and that Aleksander was getting stronger; it was only a matter of days before he was able to mount and ride the stallion, even if one arm was wrapped around her waist.

“I will. To be back among my Grisha, to have what we need readily available, to know you are safe, yes, I’ll feel better for that,” he said.

“I guess so,” Alina said, biting her lip. When he said the Little Palace or Os Alta, her mind went blank, unable to imagine the actual places, to wonder whether the streets were cobblestones or what kind of trees were planted on the avenues. She could imagine riding with him again, his cape draped around them both, the tickle of his beard at her temple, but she couldn’t imagine an arrival other than a vague and pervasive dread, Aleksander disappearing and only General Kirigan somewhere, far away from her.

“What are you scared of, Alina?” he asked. Not *why are you scared?* as if she had no good reason and not *you shouldn’t be scared*, impatient or incredulous.

“The truth?” she asked, an unnecessary question. He shrugged and nodded.

“I hope that’s what you want to tell me,” he said.

“I’m scared of everything, except being here with you, like this,” she said.

“What do you mean, *everything*? And, except being here with me?” he said.

“A week ago, I was Alina Starkov, assistant map-maker of the First Army, orphan of Keramzin, Mal’s friend, that homely half-Shu brat Ana Kuya couldn’t wait to wash her hands of. And I didn’t have a very big place in the world but I understood what it was and what the days were going to hold,” Alina said. “Then I burned the maps and got sent across the Fold and without trying to, summoned the Sun. Then you called for me and asked me what I was and told me when I didn’t give the right answer. And then I was about to be murdered for it or sanctified. You were in such a desperate hurry to get me to the Little Palace and I have no idea what will happen there, especially since all Fjerda wants me dead and the Tsar probably

wants me alive to serve him, but I don't think I will be Alina there or Alya and I don't think you'll be Aleksander anymore. And certainly not Sasha."

He sat quietly and there was not a hint of a shadow in the corners of the room, nor in his dark eyes. There was only the fading daylight that would soon require the candle to be lit.

"I understand this. Four walls, water to be fetched and drunk, food to be eaten. I know a healer could have taken care of your wounds better than I did and I'm a bad person, a terrible one, for not wishing for whatever would help you get better faster, but I'm still myself here and you're here, listening to me, and I don't think when we get to Os Alta either of those will be true any longer," she finished. "I'll be alone again and I won't even know myself anymore."

"Alina, when I came for you, when you were being attacked, I had no intention of leaving you to your own devices when we got to Os Alta. But now, it would be impossible," he said.

"It would be impossible," Aleksander repeated, "impossible for me to be far away from you, for me not to want to hear what you have to say, to answer your questions. To look for you in every room. There is no other room than this one for me, not anymore. I just hadn't thought to speak of it so soon. It didn't seem fair."

"What about any of this is fair?" Alina said, then surprised herself by starting to cry, her hands flying up to hide her face.

"Nothing," he said. "But that doesn't mean I can't wish it were. That I can't wish to do more than keep you safe. Would you come sit by me now?"

"The dishes," she muttered.

"We've nearly licked them clean, they can wait," he said.

"Ana Kuya would have your hide for that," Alina said but she got up, dragged the rickety table away from the bed and sat down next to Aleksander. She pushed a loose piece of hair behind her ear.

"What happened to your hair?" Aleksander said. She couldn't blame him for wondering. When he'd rescued her, she'd had braided in keeping with First Army regulations. It wasn't flattering but it was neat and unobjectionable which was no longer the case.

"I rinsed it out in the spring by the new cache and then bundled it back. It dried like this," she said, reaching back to touch the tangled, lumpy mess she'd imagined chopping off except that it would mark her as even more of an outcast when they got to the Little Palace. She had been too busy calming Aleksander down and then preparing a meal to do anything about it.

"I could help you with it," he offered.

"With your Small Science?" Alina asked. "I don't see how shadows will make it better."

"No, I can use a comb," he smiled.

“That would be good if we had a comb,” Alina answered.

“Will you let me try anyway?” he asked.

“You don’t have to,” she said.

“I’d like to,” he said without any more explanation than what she saw in his eyes, the curve of his lips after he finished speaking. She nodded. “Turn around a little,” he said, “you’ll be more comfortable.”

Alina wondered for a moment whether he meant because she wouldn’t be facing him, watching him touch her, or simply because she wouldn’t be contorted so that he could reach her easily, but she only wondered for a moment, because then his fingers were combing through her tangled, hastily tied back hair, disposing first of the bit of ribbon and few pins she’d used and then, very gently, teasing apart every knot.

“This was a right mess, wasn’t it, Alya?” he said, his hands still moving steadily, pausing when a particularly robust knot defied him, a far cry from Ana Kuya yanking a brush through Alina’s hair and threatening to smack her bottom with it if she wiggled again. “That’s better,” he said, grazing now her temple, now her cheek, his fingers stroking the nape of her neck as he lifted the heavy mass of her hair to settle it down her back. She thought he was would stop then and she’d weave a simple braid but she felt his hands separating the strands and starting to plait her hair in a pattern she couldn’t recognize, far more elaborate than any she’d ever worn, not pulling or tugging at all.

“What are you doing?” she asked and he stopped, resting one hand on her shoulder.

“I was going to finish braiding it, so it didn’t trouble you as much,” he said.

“General Kirigan knows how to braid a woman’s hair?” Alina asked in disbelief. He laughed.

“Yes, though it was Aleksander who learned, not the General,” he said. “It isn’t so difficult, it just requires attention and patience and I’ll tell you a secret—it’s nice to do something with my hands that isn’t summoning. Shall I stop though?”

“No, don’t stop,” Alina said. He squeezed her shoulder slightly before he lifted his hands back to her hair, resuming the steady rhythm he’d had before, lulling her into a dozy calm that was threaded through with thrill when he touched her skin. He started humming softly, singing a few lyrics here and there in that same dialect she didn’t know, the melody unfamiliar to her, though she sensed it had something to do with a pair of lovers, with beckoning and returning after a long time apart. He finished braiding and stopped singing at the same time, tracing a finger along the braid at the crown of her head that was like a diadem.

“Beautiful,” he said and she might have thought he only meant the work of his own hands but then he added, “Not homely, not ever at all, Alynoshka.”

“Did you braid Luda’s hair?” Alina asked. He grew very still behind her and she felt cold within herself, a sunless day in the depth of winter. “I’m so sorry, I shouldn’t have said

anything—”

“Yes, I did,” he said. “When she let me.”

Alina sat, clasped her hands together tightly, feeling miserable. “Aleksander—”

“It doesn’t hurt me to talk about her with you, Alya,” he said. “It was a long time ago—I’m glad someone else besides me knows her name.”

“You called it out in the night,” Alina said, a little less miserable. The hand he’d had at her head he dropped, reached forward to loosen her own in what should have been an awkward sort of embrace but wasn’t at all.

“When?”

“When I called you Sasha,” she said.

“Ah, well. That makes sense,” he said. “When she was killed, that was the last time anyone called me Sasha. Something was broken in me, past healing I thought, and I decided that could never happen again. That I could not live in a world where it might.”

“And now?” Alina said.

“I learned I was wrong,” he said.

“About yourself?” Alina asked.

“About myself, about the world. About how they can be mended,” he said. “I’m tired. Are you tired, Alya? It would be good to sleep now.”

Aleksander lay down, turned on his side. Alina moved to lie beside him, watching him settle his kefta over her legs and then his cape. She had just closed her eyes when she heard him speak.

“My favorite place at the Little Palace is the Observatory. You have to climb a narrow staircase for what seems like forever, but when you get to the top, you can see all of Os Alta below, the lights of the city like fallen stars, the golden domes of the Tsar’s palace nestled against the clouds. You can see beyond the city’s walls, into the countryside, Ravka ready to dream in the night. When we get to Os Alta, I’ll take you there, Alya, and you can see everything yourself,” he said.

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When she opened her eyes, it was dawn and there were a handful of snowflakes falling. Aleksander was already awake, watching her, his hand warm at the small of her back. She hadn’t dreamt of an observatory but of a vast library, of looking up and finding Aleksander watching her in just the same way, of his hand reaching to caress her coronet of braids. She made a low sound of contentment, remembering there was broth to heat and sfera to cast to make him smile.

“I’ve been lying here wondering about something you said. Why would a cartographer burn maps? I’m asking you now because someone will surely ask in Os Alta—Alina, are you a Shu spy? Whatever you say in Os Alta, tell me the truth now.”

# Chapter 7

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Alina took a long, deep breath and closed her eyes, as Aleksander had instructed her to when she was trying to create a sfera as neatly wound as a ball of yarn. When she opened them, the room was filled only with the ordinary light of a snowy daybreak and Aleksander was still regarding her with an intent curiosity, his hand resting at her back.

“You think I am a spy?” she asked. Each word was so small but taken together, the question was enormous. Devastating.

“Alina, I asked you to tell me the truth,” he said, lingering on *me* and not *truth*. That and the look in his eyes was what made his earlier question tolerable. “I offered a possibility.”

“That I’m a Shu spy. After the past few days, you think that’s a real possibility,” she said. “A Shu spy who wouldn’t have simply killed you in your sleep.”

“I didn’t say you were a terribly good one. That it was what you wanted to be,” Aleksander countered, but mildly. “And you haven’t denied it yet, I’m afraid I have to point out. Can you?”

“You think I’m an incompetent Shu spy who’s also a Sun Summoner? Or is the Sun Summoner part also supposed to be a lie?” she snapped. “I’m Shu, so I’m a liar, a sneak—”

“I know you are a Sun Summoner. I’ve known from the first moment I touched you,” he said and she felt him do something with his shadows and her light. “I told you, I only want the truth between us.”

“And Os Alta and Ravka can go hang?” Alina said. That made him angry, made him narrow his eyes and a muscle worked in his jaw.

“I’ve given more for this country than you can ever imagine, for longer than you can ever imagine,” he said. It felt like time had broken, as if she were back in his billowing ebony silk tent beside the Fold being interrogated by the Darkling General, and yet still they lay quietly in the bed, his black linen shirt open at the neck, her hair intricately braided by his hands.

“I’m not a spy. For Shu-Han or anywhere, anyone else,” she said.

“Then why did you burn the maps?” he asked.

“You’ll think it’s stupid, I’m stupid and silly,” she said. “And possibly treasonous, because it’s true that the First Army mapmakers aren’t supposed to be destroying military intelligence.”

“Did you think your work wasn’t good enough? That you’d be scolded for it?” he said.

“No.”

“Then why, Alina?”

“For Mal,” she mumbled. Even as close as they were, Aleksander looked confused.

“Formal? I don’t understand,” he said.

“Mal. My friend, Malyen Oretsev,” she said. She would once have said *my only friend* but it sounded pathetic and it wasn’t true anymore.

“He asked you to burn the maps?”

“No, he had no idea I did it,” Alina said. “He was being sent across the Fold and I wasn’t going with him. When I burned the maps, they had to send mapmakers to replace them.”

“You wanted to cross the Fold, when you knew you might die doing it, because of a boy?” Aleksander said.

“He’s a man and it’s not like that between us but yes,” Alina said. Aleksander had a most peculiar expression on his face, a mixture of bemusement and disbelief and something astonishing that had to be jealousy? She almost checked to see if his fever had spiked by laying a palm on his cheek but she stopped, letting it rest between them, close to his heart.

“He’s the reason you were revealed as the Sun Summoner,” Aleksander said. “You were trying to save him.”

“I wasn’t trying, it just happened,” Alina said, remembering how it felt to be lying beside Mal, how his mouth had looked saying *meet you in the meadow*. How the light had come from nowhere and everywhere. “But I did. Save him,” Alina said. Alexei she had not saved, nor the rest of her team, and she felt the weight of their losses again, as if for the first time. The shame she felt for causing their deaths was not something she could tell Aleksander—or even Sasha.

“To know you saved someone you care for so much is a blessing,” he said. “You met in the First Army?”

“No, at Keramzin. We grew up together,” she said.

“Were you tested as a child?” he said.

“We hid. We were different enough already, we didn’t want to be even more alone,” she said.

“But the woman running the orphanage must have known.”

“She did. But we knew then that the Grisha were there. We knew they hurt children, to find out, so I broke a glass, I cut my palm so it wouldn’t work. I’d already be in pain,” she said. She glanced down at her palm between them, the scar curved like a crescent moon; his eyes followed and then she felt his fingers gently stroke her back.



“Did Mal do that too?”

“No,” Alina said. As a little girl, she had only thought she must do whatever she could to stay with Mal, at Keramzin, but now she could see how he hadn’t done the same. He would have left her if he had been Grisha. She couldn’t blame him for it but it hurt, to recognize how even then, she had wanted him more than he wanted her.

“You’re not alone,” he said. “To care so much is a credit to you. To be that loyal, that fierce —”

“I was afraid,” she said. “He was all I had.”

“I understand,” he said. “And I understand it will take time for you to know it’s not true anymore.”

“How long?” she asked.

“As long as it does. As long as it takes I’ll be beside you. I told you, I waited for you a long time. It’s not hard to wait with you here,” he said.

“It’s not?” The moment hung between them like the first star of the night, the last star that faded in a pale pink dawn. And then Alina’s stomach growled and Aleksander smiled.

“It’s much harder to wait for breakfast,” he said.

He waited until she’d eaten a good half of her bowl of rabbit broth and he’d made reasonable inroads on his own. She wished they had a kettle so she could make him another tisane and he’d wished they had another pot so she could start stewing the apricots, but it was easier to make wishes that wouldn’t come true with enough food the day and the following one, with Aleksander’s fever much lower if not entirely gone. They would need to have a more serious conversation about when he could ride and Alina hoped it wouldn’t be an argument.

“Do you miss him? Your friend Mal?”

“I do. I’m more worried about him though,” Alina said. “It’s hard to miss someone when you’re worrying about them, it’s like they’re with you all the time. I wish I knew—”

“Knew what?” he interrupted, his face with that same anticipation she’d seen earlier.

“That he was all right. He was bleeding when the ship left the Fold. They carted him off to the medic’s tent and when the Grisha shoved me in the carriage, I barely saw him. I didn’t see goodbye, not properly,” she said.

“My carriage,” Aleksander said. She filled her spoon with broth and let it spill back down.

“I can find out when we’re in Os Alta, how he is,” Aleksander said. “I can make sure he’s safe, healthy. I’ll dispatch a Healer if he’s still injured or sick.”

“Why would you do that for a tracker in the First Army?”

“Because I don’t expect you to stop caring about him even though you are Grisha,” he said.

“Because I can’t promise to find out anything about your parents. Because you have a scar on your forehead and one on your hand. I don’t want any more for you.”

“I—Aleksander, thank you, you don’t have to—”

“I wouldn’t let any other Grisha coming to the Little Palace worry about their family suffering,” he said. “If they are not orphans, they are not treated as such. He is your family, your kin, isn’t he?”

“Yes,” she said. More than anything else, that was what Mal was to her; that was what she felt most confident he’d say she was to him. It was the answer Aleksander wanted to be true and she could live with that.

“Then I will make sure,” he said. “When we get to Os Alta, you’ll be able to write to him.”

“Is that supposed to convince me you are well enough to ride there today? Because I’m not falling for it,” she said.

“I wasn’t trying to trick you,” he said, all sincere innocence.

“But you wouldn’t have said a word if I’d gotten all excited and declared we should leave right away,” Alina countered.

“Zakon dvoynoy effekt,” he shrugged. “That means—”

“I know what it means and you’re wrong in the interpretation,” Alina said. “The library at Keramzin was the best place to hide on rainy days and no one else ever wanted to read the Duke’s collection of treatises on ethics. I had those all to myself, tucked up in the window seat. Ana Kuya never found me.”

“You are going to give me a great deal of trouble, I think,” Aleksander said.

“I expect it will be reciprocated. I thought after I looked at your dressings, you might want to give me a lesson on riding. Or at least how best not to fall off your horse,” she said. They’d finished the broth, to the last savory grain of rice, and she got up to rinse out the pot and start some water for his tisane. He needed as much strengthening as he could get if they were going to get back to the Little Palace before the snow fell in earnest.

“I wouldn’t let you fall off Opasnost,” he replied and Alina started laughing.

“You seriously ride a huge black stallion whose name means ‘danger?’”

“It’s for the Oprichniki, my personal guard. They have a taste for the obvious,” Aleksander said. “It’s little enough to keep them happy and amusing for those with a sense of the absurd.”

“Is that why your clothes are all black, every stitch?” she asked. “Darkling, taken literally?”

“That’s just practical. Black doesn’t show stains. And at the Tsar’s court, everything is gold spangles, silver glitter, lace, ribbons, filigree. I haven’t forgotten where I came from and I don’t mean anyone else to,” he replied.

“That’s why the collar of your cape is sable,” Alina said. She had tucked it close to his chin when he shook with chills, hoping it would help him stay warm. “To show you’re a man of the people, an eater of lentils and herring, content with a bedroll and a canteen and a pair of dusty boots.”

“It’s only the trim,” he said. He was incapable of sounding petulant, but he’d sidled right up next to it.

“It’s all right to enjoy a little luxury,” she said. “I had a blue silk scarf that I loved.”

“What happened to it?”

“I lost it in the Fold,” she said.

“What shade of blue was it?” he asked.

“Like irises,” she said. She’d once fancied it was the color of Mal’s eyes but she found she wasn’t sure anymore if that had been true or only what she wished. She dropped a handful of herbs into the simmering water, then poured it into a cup and added some honey. Aleksander took it, drank, and watched her with his lips on the rim of the cup.

“Finish that all up and then we’ll see what the day holds,” she said. “Opasnost has missed you. I’m a poor substitute.”

“No, you’re not,” he said and stopped. He wasn’t going to argue or explain or persuade.

## Chapter End Notes

Zakon dvoynoy effket = law of double effect. The principle of double effect – also known as the rule of double effect; the doctrine of double effect, often abbreviated as DDE or PDE, double-effect reasoning; or simply double effect – is a set of ethical criteria which Christian philosophers, and some others, have advocated for evaluating the permissibility of acting when one's otherwise legitimate act (for example, relieving a terminally ill patient's pain) may also cause an effect one would otherwise be obliged to avoid (sedation and a slightly shortened life). The first known example of double-effect reasoning is Thomas Aquinas' treatment of homicidal self-defense, in his work *Summa Theologica*.

This set of criteria states that an action having foreseen harmful effects practically inseparable from the good effect is justifiable if the following are true:

the nature of the act is itself good, or at least morally neutral;  
the agent intends the good effect and does not intend the bad effect either as a means to the good or as an end in itself;  
the good effect outweighs the bad effect in circumstances sufficiently grave to justify causing the bad effect and the agent exercises due diligence to minimize the harm

## Chapter 8

"I don't see how you expect me to teach you to ride from here," Aleksander said as Alina took a step back. She'd brought one of the chairs out of the cottage and settled it across from where the stallion was still tethered, holding Aleksander's arm as he walked the short distance from the door and sat down, his kefta draped around his shoulders.

"You didn't see the state of your back," she replied. The two lower wounds were healing slowly, so slowly, and she wished she understood how to make her summoned light into healing. She had let her hands linger on him as long as she dared, hoping something would happen, but Aleksander only breathed a little more quickly and let his head fall forward, his lashes dark against his cheeks. She'd moved away and mumbled an apology he stopped by taking her hand in his and running his thumb across her knuckles.

"Besides, you taught me to cast sfera from your bed," Alina said.

"My bed?" Aleksander said and she blushed.

"The bed. Now you're in the chair and you can tell me what to do just as well as standing next to me," she said, walking over to Opasnost and running a hand lightly along his neck. "Isn't that right, Opasnost?"

"He's a war-horse, a General's stallion, Alina," Aleksander said. "You speak to him as if he is a pet. Your first pony."

"I suppose he is my first pony," Alina smiled. "And we are friends of a sort, he and I."

"He responds to your power," Aleksander said. "He's familiar with it."

"I bring his water. And I let him have one of your apricots," Alina replied.

"Nevertheless," Aleksander said, crossing his long legs at the ankle with an elegant economy of movement Alina should not have noticed at all but she did and he did too.

"If I unfasten the tether, will he stay?" she asked.

"If I tell him to," he said.

"You don't have to do anything else?"

"Independent of my abilities as a Grisha, my voice is the one he was trained to follow. In battle, in peace, he need only hear my briefest command," Aleksander said.

"So, can you say, 'Opasnost, don't throw Alina off your back?'" she replied.

"I don't have to. He doesn't want to do that. And you don't need to worry about it anyway, we'll be riding together," Aleksander said. "When we get to Os Alta, I'll find you a horse better suited to you. A mare, more biddable than Opasnost, but with spirit."

Alina tried to imagine such a horse and imagine herself upon it, voluntarily. Her failure must have been evident on her face because Aleksander chuckled.

“You will enjoy it. It won’t be the way it has been, riding for our lives,” he said. “Opasnost may be a sort of friend of yours, but your mare will belong to you, eager to please you. There are beautiful places we can explore without any fear.”

“We’ll have to get there first. And that means I need to be able to get on your horse. Without you dragging me up there,” Alina said.

“I didn’t realize you were concerned with how it looked,” he said.

“I’m not. I’m not counting on you being strong enough to do it when we leave,” she said, waiting to see if he’d be offended or defensive.

“I appreciate your caution,” he said. “If not your confidence in me.”

“Anyone else would have died with your injuries, Aleksander. You came far too close,” she said. “And we both have our reasons for wanting to get to the Little Palace. We can’t stay here much longer, I know that.”

“Then untie Opasnost’s tether. And when he is free, see if you can reach the pommel of the saddle,” Aleksander said. “Put your foot in the stirrup and pull yourself up.”

Alina reached up and managed to grab the pommel, shoved her foot in the stirrup and tried to launch herself up onto the saddle; unlike being a cartographer, partially completing the steps yielded absolutely nothing except for Aleksander’s cough as he choked back laughter. She felt like she’d nearly pulled her arm out of its socket and could only congratulate herself on not falling down in a heap beside the stallion.

“I appreciate your confidence in me, if not your caution,” Alina said. “I think the reality is I’m going to need to climb up. Using one of those chairs—we’ll have to sacrifice it to the elements.”

“You’re giving up too soon,” Aleksander said. “And I think the stirrup length is wrong for you but that can’t be changed if we’re riding together. Try again, though. You were close.”

Somehow, through some miracle, she managed it the second time and suddenly found herself looking down on Aleksander from a great height. It occurred to her that no one else had ever been in this situation perhaps, superior to him, for all that she was barely hanging onto the saddle; the look in his eyes told her so and also that he did not dislike it, though there was no smile on his parted lips.

“See, Alya, see what you are capable of,” he said softly.

The alteration in his tone, the sense she had of his shadows and how warm they could be, pushed her beyond her tenuous balance. She let out a little cry as she started to fall off Opasnost, going silent when Aleksander sprang up from his chair and caught her, one arm around her waist, keeping her upright, pressing her against him.

“No,” she gasped and he stiffened, dropping his arm. Withdrew, his eyes darkness like the Fold’s.

“I beg your forgiveness, dvoryanka” he said, all formality, as if they were before the entire Imperial court. She shook her head at him and he tilted his in inquiry.

“No,” she repeated. “You’ll hurt yourself—”

“You weigh hardly anything,” he argued. “Far too little in fact.”

“I’m very well as I am,” she said, aware it was a lie, that she’d only begun to enjoy the taste of anything since they arrived at the cottage, knowing she was small and plain, someone most people paid little heed to.

“I know how it is with you, Alya. How it was,” he said. “It will be better. As you use your power, you will find everything more satisfying.”

“Everything is a lot,” she replied.

“I know,” he said. “But it’s what you are capable of. Made for. It won’t feel overwhelming, it will feel right. Natural.”

“You think you know me so well?” she asked, more curious than argumentative.

“I know enough,” he said. “I know you have surpassed my every hope. My every hopeless wish.” He lifted her hand, the one with the scar, to his lips and brushed the lightest kiss against the crescent on her palm. He held her gaze as she closed her hand around the caress. “I know you don’t believe me and I know you’re very stubborn. But I like a challenge.”

“That sounds like could be a promise,” she said.

“I’d like it to be,” he said.

“All right. But now you have to go lie down,” she said.

“You will not be able to end every discussion by sending me to bed for much longer, Alya,” he said, walking back towards the cottage.

“Then I’ll revel in it for now,” she replied.

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While he slept, she washed her face and hands, daring to strip down to her small-clothes and scrubbed herself hurriedly. She’d said all she looked forward to was the work of the Little Palace’s kitchens, but she hadn’t mentioned her longing for a proper bath, even if all she had was a wooden tub and a few inches of cold water. The cottage had not been meant for longer term habitation, was clearly a refuge; it had served its purpose well but despite her concern that they’d leave too soon, she could sense their need to depart approaching. When he woke, his eyes were bright and he asked for something to eat “anything at all” before she had a chance to offer him the bowl of rice she’d prepared.

“Tell me about the Little Palace,” she said.

“What do you want to know?” he asked. “Where shall I begin?”

“Where will I stay?” she asked, thinking *how far away will you be?* “Who will I meet?” she went on, thinking *who should I trust?*

“As the Sun Summoner, you will occupy the Vezda suite, befitting your unique abilities and status,” he said. “It’s down the hallway from my own quarters, should you find you need anything from me.”

“But there, you’re General Kirigan, the Darkling. I can’t just knock on your door whenever I feel like it,” she said.

“That’s right. You don’t have to knock. The door will always be open for you, Alina,” he said.

“And your guards will like that?”

“They follow my orders,” he said. “They don’t have to like anything.”

“Still, you said people will think I’m a Shu spy. If I’m seen slipping into your rooms—”

“You are not a spy. You are the Sun Summoner. We will make sure everyone knows that and no one will think twice about our meetings,” he said. Alina nodded though she did not entirely agree. He had been so powerful for so long, he might not fully imagine how those who answered to him would feel about someone like her. A nobody with no connections, nothing but her poorly understood light to justify her presence.

“I told you, you are not alone. I will be there at the Little Palace, but I won’t be the only person you can turn to,” he said. “I will make sure Genya Safin attends you and you may always depend on Ivan, my personal guard.”

“That’s all?” Alina asked. She had not made many close friends in the First Army, but there was a reliable camaraderie among the cartographers and any orphan of Keramzin was consider family once they left. And there was Mal. Even if she was not assigned to his unit or division, she had the chance to catch a glimpse of him or send a message.

“You will make your own friends, Alya,” Aleksander said. “Just make sure they earn your trust. If they break it, there will be no second chance.”

“You’d have them killed?” Alina exclaimed, aghast.

“What? No, of course not!”

“But what did you mean—”

“They would be sent from the Little Palace as long as you are in residence. Places would be found for them in noble houses or on the frontiers. They would still be my Grisha, under my



protection,” he explained. “They would simply not be able to pose any threat to you. Ever again.”

“I imagine I’ll be extremely popular once the word gets out,” she said wryly.

“If anything, you will have to decide who truly merits your interest, your kindness. Your laughter,” he said. “To them, you are a being nearly divine, the Sun Summoner, the one who will unmake the Fold. Only some of them will be able to appreciate Alina and try to talk to her.”

“You mentioned I will unmake the Fold. How exactly?” He’d finished the bowl of rice and she slid the little tin of comfits towards him, watched the small smile on his lips as he ate a few of them.

“The Little Palace is a place of learning. You will have full access to the Library and lessons in combat, in Grisha lore and history, in philosophy and the Small Science. Summoning,” he said.

“You will teach me Summoning?”

“That remains to be seen,” he said.

“But why?” Alina asked. “Who else could teach me?”

“Baghra,” Aleksander said, pausing, clearly caught up in a memory. “But I hesitate to send you to her alone. Her methods are her own, she is almost a relic of another age—”

“She hits her students, doesn’t she?” Alina said.

“With a birch branch. But I would not let her hit you, Alina,” he said. “I will not.”

“How else will I learn what I need to know?” Alina said.

“You and I will have to figure that out together,” he said. “And quickly. The court must see what you can do, what no one else has ever been able to do.”

“And then I’ll unmake the Fold,” she said.

“And then, you’ll decide. We’ll decide,” he said.

“But why in the world wouldn’t I want to destroy the Fold? After everyone who has been killed, lost—”

“Those people cannot be brought back. The question is whether the existence of the Fold prevents more deaths than it causes, what Ravka would be without it. Whether the solution is safe passage for the Grisha and their allies,” he said.

“How can I decide that?” she asked.

“Didn’t you tell me you read the Duke’s ethical treatises? We have many more in the Library. And I have a shatranj board,” he said. “I have found a game or two can bring tremendous clarity—”

“People are not pawns,” she said flatly.

“But the child learns through play and the adult may do the same,” he said, pushing the comfits back to her. “Have a sweet. We needn’t resolve everything tonight, Alya. We’ll have plenty of time once we’re safe in the Little Palace.”

“I don’t want to hurt anyone,” she said. “I don’t want anyone hurt because of me.”

“I know, solnyskha. But I also know you understand that when you make maps, there are places you cannot imagine before you find them and yet, you would not stop drawing, trying to find a safe way through for the people who are relying on you,” he said, sounding tired, careworn, and impossibly tender. She took a comfit from the tin and let the sugar dissolve on her tongue, tasting what he wanted to take away bitterness. She thought of Alexei and the others who’d died, of Mal on the deck of the skiff and Aleksander after the last arrow had struck him, how he’d held her closer for just a moment before he killed the Fjerdans. She took a second comfit and bit down, feeling her light rise, like the water that quenched a terrible thirst.

“Let’s save the rest for the journey to Os Alta,” she said. “How long will it take?”

“Two days, maybe three,” he said.

“Not so very far then,” she said.

“Not very far—and yet a world away,” he said. “Tomorrow?”

“If your fever doesn’t spike,” she said. “If you sleep easily tonight.”

“I expect I will,” he said. “You will be there.”

## Chapter 9

“You need to finish every bite of that rabbit porridge,” Alina said, hearing echoes of Ana Kuya in her voice. “You know they say it’s important to make a good breakfast before you embark upon a journey—a full stomach travels on light feet.”

“They say that?” Aleksander replied. But he lifted another spoonful of the porridge to his lips.

“In Keramzin,” Alina said.

“You must eat too or I’ll stop altogether,” he said. Alina set down the red kefta she’d been shaking out and ate directly from the pot; Aleksander nodded approvingly.

“This wouldn’t have kept well anyway and I wouldn’t want to waste it,” she said. “I’ve packed up the honey and salt, the dried meat, apricots and the comfits. I thought we might take one of the tin cups but leave the rest behind for anyone else who needs this place.”

“That seems thoughtful,” he said, chasing the last bite of the soupy gruel with his spoon. “You accept this is the right time to leave then?”

“I accept that you are well enough to argue with me from dawn ‘til dusk,” she said. “Perhaps you missed your calling as an advocate in the law courts.”

“Then we are well-matched again, for I would set you against the most senior member of Chancery and watch them flounder. The fur caps would fall from the judges’ heads in the wake of your litigation.”

“Do they really wear fur caps taller than the Tsar’s crown?” Alina asked.

“Yes. Fox, for they cannot be outwitted,” Aleksander smiled. “So it is said. In Os Alta, if not in Kermazin. I find it aspirational rather than predictive in most cases, though Sudit’ Kagan is justifiably renowned and so gifted I have sometimes wondered about we have missed a Grisha on the bench.”

“Are there many Grisha you don’t find?” she asked.

“Not anymore,” he said. “Before the Little Palace was built, there was no safe place for Grisha children to be raised so their families hid them if they could. It took some time to gain trust, for people to let their children be taken away from them, but they were not cut off, they might send gifts and visit. There is a guesthouse in Os Alta for relatives who live far away and any Grisha within a day’s travel may return to their birthplace once they are able to defend themselves to Master Botkin’s satisfaction.”

“There are not many orphans,” she said. She would be an outcast among outcasts, too old, too odd, with a power she didn’t understand, a burden Aleksander might tire of. Must.

“More than you might think,” he replied. He’d finished eating but seemed in no rush to stop talking or try to continue the conversation on Opasnost’s back. “It’s only that most of them don’t try to conceal themselves when the testers come. They come to the Little Palace when they are small, six, seven, eight, and the other Grisha, the teachers, become a family of sorts. Much as Mal became yours, if I’m not mistaken. They would not say they are orphans because they are Grisha and they know what it means to belong. It’s too bad Nina is away—she came from the orphanage at Tsemna. I think you would find yourself comfortable with her and her wit is quick, enough to keep up with you.”

“Why are you indulging me like this?” she asked before she could stop herself. “You’ve been so impatient to leave but now, you’re answering all my questions as if we’ve plenty of daylight, plenty of provisions, and Os Alta just over the next ridge. Why aren’t you telling me to hurry up?”

“Would you?” he asked and she shrugged, shook her head, and he smiled. “I didn’t think so. But that’s not why. I know you’re nervous, about the journey, about our arrival. A few more minutes won’t make a difference-- except that you might feel a little better about leaving. You might want to go to the Little Palace for yourself, not only for me.”

“I want to go with you,” she said, startling them both with her directness, a wish she’d stated as clearly as a demand, with none of the confidence of one who expected to have it met.

“You put me to shame with your honesty, Alya,” he said.

“Have you been lying to me then?” she asked, suddenly feeling small and cold, like a stone to be kicked from his path. He’d called to her, for her, he’d held her in his arms at night and when he thought she was hurt, but perhaps it was less true than she’d believed. Than she’d wanted it to be.

“No,” he said. “No, Alya,” he repeated in a lower tone, warmer. “I haven’t lied to you. But when we get to the Little Palace, you may feel that I have. That I have kept things from you and I have.”

“Why?”

“Because some things you must see for yourself. Because other things were more important to tell you now, first,” he said. “Because I don’t know what I don’t know, what it is I haven’t said you will feel I ought to have, to have known and to have told you. I’m not lying to you but my attempts at candor may feel like deceit when we leave this place.”

“That sounds terrible,” she said. “Because we have to go.”

“If—when it happens, be angry at me,” he said. “Argue with me. Tell me why I was wrong. I may not agree but I want to hear you.”

“You won’t simply deny whatever I accuse you of?” she said.

“I’ll probably try to. Sometimes,” he admitted. “But not always.”

“You’re not lying right now, are you?” she asked.

“I’m not, but I don’t expect you to believe me without having doubts,” he said. “Doubt keeps Grisha alive. I’m not a god, I don’t demand unquestioning faith. I don’t need it or want it. Not from you.”

“What do you want?” she said.

“I want to go with you,” he said. “I want you to bring your questions to me. I want to know you’re safe.”

There was a long pause then, a space between them for his words to linger without any further amendments. A setting of terms, like a negotiation, Alina thought, except that she had no experience of diplomacy, just a vague idea of powers meeting with their own goals to be achieved. An ally’s offer, resources and options put forth in good faith, she thought, though she had little experience of allies, the few she’d been able to claim dead or grievously wounded by her own choices. A lover’s proposal, intimate and dear, a hand, a voice in the night, protection and praise and such a wonderful longing, though she had only ever been the lover and never the beloved. It had been so short a time, how could they be that to each other? It had been a lifetime, his that she’d won back, hers that he’d revealed to her; how could they be anything other? Opasnost, bless him, nickered loud enough to be heard and a cloud passed over the sun, shifting the light in the room from honey to palest nectar.

“We should go,” Alina said. “Let me help you with your kefta.”

“You don’t need—” he began and stopped when she gave him a quelling look. “Thank you, Alya.”

Opasnost took the first twenty miles too quickly to allow for much conversation. They weren’t riding at the absolute breakneck speed of their flight from the Fjerdans, but the pace was still brisk, sound of the wind and of Opasnost’s hooves against the earth loud enough to keep Alina from hearing much after Aleksander had spoken nearly into her ear as they set off *Remember he doesn’t want to throw you*. It was not overwhelming the way it had been before, when she knew her life hung in the balance, her safety in the care of the fearsome, dark stranger behind her, the space closing between her former life and her future, the light within her a vast, uncontrollable force; now she was overwhelmed by the awareness that it was Aleksander behind her, Sasha whose arm was tight around her waist, his breath soft at her temple, the tension in his body borne of their closeness, of the pull on his barely healed wounds and the pull of her light to his shadow, the future rushing to meet them, as inescapable as the scent of his skin.

They broke for a brief meal sometime after noon, as much to let Opasnost drink some water from a brook as for their own refreshment. Aleksander had a good appetite, making quick work of the apricots and dried meat Alina set out, but she wasn’t very hungry and toyed with the food, offering it to Aleksander rather than waste it. He wouldn’t take it, looked at her face carefully and then coaxed her to cast a dozen sfera, as delicate and well-formed as pearls; he cast his own shadows to conceal the light and smiled when she admitted the use of her power

had whetted her own hunger, at least for a few bites. The ache in her back and the strain in her thighs didn't leave but she was able to bear them more easily, which was close enough to relief given that he told her they must ride until sunset to reach a place of relative security where they might spend the night.

By late afternoon, Alina was tired. She'd never spent so much time riding and there were hours yet to go to reach the place Aleksander had spoken of, a secluded dell inaccessible unless you'd learned the ways of the dark forest; it might as well be on the Moon as far as she was concerned, the journey there endless, the place itself made of rumors and tales. She wished she could ask Aleksander to let them stop for a few minutes but she knew she could never get back onto Opasnost and that every moment, they were closer to nightfall and they needed whatever safety could be found in the dell. She fought the urge to lean back and let Aleksander bear her weight, to close her eyes and drift with the rhythm of the stallion's stride.

"It's all right, you can go to sleep, Alya," Aleksander said.

"What? No, I'm fine, it's you—"

"I've far more experience than you with these kind of expeditions. Riding Opasnost, sleeping rough," he said. "I know you're thinking of my injuries but I've been injured before with no one to help."

"I'll make it harder for you," she said. "If I even could fall asleep."

"It won't be hard at all. You're such a little thing, I can keep you close," he said. "Rest your eyes anyway and see what happens. Isn't that what you told me?"

"I told you to lie down," she said, but she already felt drowsy, Aleksander having subtly adjusting his arm around her, shifting her so that it was the easiest thing to lay her head against his chest. He drew the edge of his cape around her like a coverlet and she breathed in the scent of him, underneath woodsmoke and caraway, honey and blood, something dark as a winter night, as fresh as the snow that fell during a winter dusk.

"So you did," he agreed. "I listened to you. Listen to me, won't you?"

"I'll try," she said and she felt the resonance of his answer before she heard it, the soft rumble of his soft laugh.

"Fair enough," he said.

"You were right," Alina said, trying to find a decorous way to stretch after dismounting from Opasnost. Suppressing the accompanying yelps was taking most of her effort and there was still camp to be made. "I didn't think I'd fall asleep but I did."

"That's good," Aleksander said. He was looking pale again, but not nearly as drawn as she might have expected after the long ride, small meal, and slowly healing wounds. "Did you

dream?"

"A little," she said, reluctant to tell him more, how she'd dreamt of him pulling his shadows around them as easily as his cape, of seeing her sfera reflected in his eyes the way the Tsaritsa's sapphires could hold a star, his hands slipping beneath her kefta. His voice eager, a little uncertain, calling her *Alinochka, milaya, moya dusha*, the sweet, heady taste of her light on his lips like the sip she'd once had of medovukha, the tickle of his dark beard at her throat and the sudden, wondrous silencing of her laughter...

"A dream on a journey is better than a talisman," Aleksander remarked. He looked curious but he kept dealing with Opasnost, loosening his bridle and making sure he was properly tethered while Alina took in the dell with its tumbling brook and utter lack of any shelter.

"I dreamed of sfera," she said, blurting the words out as if she were making a confession.

"That's wonderful," he said.

"Why?"

"It means you've accepted it, that you are Grisha," he said. "That your power belongs to you, awake or asleep, you know who you are. What you want."

She felt her cheeks burning then, thinking of what he said and what she'd dreamt. Of how close they had been and yet the words spoken between them could all be explained away, how short a time they had spent together and how she'd never dreamt of anyone as she had him. How she'd never had such a dream of Mal, only the waving meadow, only being a child and running through fields full of scarlet poppies. She glanced at Aleksander and saw how he was regarding her with the same scrutiny he'd once given her when he was not sure who or what she was. He opened his mouth, about to say something, she couldn't bear to imagine what, so she spoke quickly.

"What we want is somewhere to sleep. We haven't gotten much to work with. What I wouldn't give for Ana Kuya's hatchet, I'd take down some of those pine branches there," she gestured at a group of trees, "and make a little lean-to. It would do for a night as long as we don't get any real snow."

"Those branches?" Aleksander asked, pointing where she had, but without anything in his tone to suggest he thought she was silly or the choice ill-considered.

"Yes," she said and then he moved his hands swiftly, the sudden darkness he conjured keener than a scythe. The branches tumbled to the ground and he let his hands drop to his sides.

"Aleksander!"

"Would it have been better if I'd used an axe?" he said and shrugged, still a different man from the one who'd said something similar over the cleaved body of her would-be assassin. Still a man who'd lived through too many assassination attempts, who'd buried too many who hadn't. There was no ritual solemnity to his use of his powers unless he decided it was necessary. "Should I let us freeze rather than use the Cut?"

“I thought that was only for life-or-death situations,” she said.

“Without any shelter, I’m fairly certain this qualifies, Alina,” he said but when she crossed her arms in front of her, he shrugged again and gave her a half-smile. “We are called to use our power to protect ourselves. You might have found a way to burn the limbs from the trunk with your light but the resin in the tree would have gone up like a Shu krystanth flare in the night—and you might have burned yourself, badly. Neither of us can ride again for a few hours and Opasnost needs to rest as well; when night falls, it will get very cold. I don’t make a practice of using the Cut without cause.”

“But did it hurt you? I know you’ve said using your powers makes you stronger but I’ve seen you exhaust yourself,” she said.

“I’m fine. I’ll be better when we’ve made that lean-to,” he said.

“When I’ve made it,” she corrected. “You sit down. You’ve done enough. You can sip some water and have something to eat. I don’t like the look of you—”

“You wound me,” he said, wryly amused. But he sat down, a tree at his back, and ate a handful of comfits, popping them into his mouth one at a time like a boy dawdling before getting back to his chores might.

Aline got to work, the muscles of her lower back and thighs protesting mightily. She managed to arrange a stable enough frame, layered it with the pine branches as thickly as she could, and made a passable matting from fallen needles and leaves, so they didn’t have to sleep directly on the cold earth. It was basic and created with little finesse, but the cartography division hadn’t been trained to do more, and Ana Kuya had not encouraged sleeping outdoors, no matter how much Mal pestered her. She finished just as the first stars were coming out. The rising moon was hidden by the treetops.

“Now I’m telling you to sit down,” Aleksander said. He’d moved to sit under the shelter and gestured to the space beside him. “And you need to eat something, none of this nonsense about not being very hungry again.”

“But I didn’t—”

“You didn’t have to. I don’t like the look of you,” he said. He brushed away a faded leaf that had gotten caught in her hair. “Sit down, Alina. Please.”

“I don’t look forward to getting up again, to be painfully honest,” she said.

“I don’t imagine you would,” he said. “Even the most experienced calvary officers in the Second Army would have found that ride taxing. You did very well indeed.”

He was quiet while she ate some of the dried fruit and venison he offered to her, not nagging her to eat more but simply continuing to pick out one more piece and hold it out to her.

“I’m full,” she said after several minutes had passed. “I’ve gotten by on far less than that, you don’t need to scold.”



"I wasn't going to scold you, Alina. I was going to promise you'd never have to just get by anymore," he said, his empty hand hovering near her cheek. She felt the most powerful urge to lean into his palm, grew very still instead. He let his hand drop and shifted, pressing his lips together. How dark his dark eyes were...

"You're in pain," she said. "Let me look at your dressings, I'll make the smallest sfera, just enough to see by."

"It won't change anything," he said. She couldn't argue with him; she had no medicines or salves to apply, no fresh linen to bandage him with.

"Then lie down and sleep," she said. "I can keep watch. I'm not so tired."

"You're not a very good liar, Alya," he said gently. "And it's too cold to sleep alone." He lay back and raised his arm to invite her near, his cape lifted up so he could tuck it around them both. They had no fire and the air was growing bitter, their breath like clouds in an empty sky. "Come keep warm with me."

She wriggled over, keeping some space between them, as if they'd never slept together in the cottage. As if she hadn't spent the day sharing the saddle with him, his thighs pressed against hers, his heartbeat underneath her cheek as she'd dozed.

"You're too far away," he murmured. "I only want to keep you warm, Alya. That's all."

"I didn't want to crowd you," she said. Lied. He made a low sound in his throat and she waited to see if he'd tell her what a bad liar she was again. She moved closer and felt his arms around her and then his cape.

"You're not," he said and then a moment later, "you're trembling. Will you let me help?"

*You can't* she wanted to say, *you won't, you won't want to. You shouldn't*, she tasted the words, aware that beyond all logic or reasoning, she wanted him to kiss her, to touch her bare skin, to reach for her desperately, to gasp into her mouth when she cupped the back of his head and then let her hand fall to his neck, guiding him to her, her longing answering his.

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"All you have to tell me is stop," he said. *I won't want you to stop*, she thought.

"All right," she said. He did something with the fastening of his kefta and drew her flush against him so that the heat of his body spread through her kefta and chemise to her skin. It wasn't the feverish warmth she'd known the past few nights, only the heat of a healthy man holding a woman in his arms. As her breath evened out, he began to stroke her arms from shoulder to wrist, in a long, smooth movement that quieted her tense, aching muscles and jangled nerves.

"Alya?" he asked. "I can't see your face, you have to tell me."

"You don't have to stop," she said. His hands moved from her arms to the outside of her thighs, where the hours of riding had caused the greatest strain, his palms warm and steady,

his breathing slow and deep, just loud enough that she could match him.

“I feel like this is how you’d curry Opasnost in the Little Palace stables,” Alina said. Aleksander laughed, rich, charmed sound that she could feel against her shoulder blades and along her spine.

“I assure it, it is not,” he said.

“Then is it part of the Small Science?” she asked as he kept touching her with a deliberate care that had no precedent and yet felt entirely familiar.

“No,” he said. “Luda would sometimes do this for me after a long journey. Not healing, just a sort of reminding. Making the body recall its tranquility. Making it easy again.”

“But she loved you,” Alina said.

“She did,” he said, his hands keeping their rhythm, not straying to the curve of her bottom or beneath the hem of the red kefta. “I trusted her.”

“You didn’t have to share this with me,” Alina said, meaning his hands on her and his memories, the grief he carried for so long and the man he’d been, the one he’d become.

“Do you want me to stop?” he asked.

“No,” she said, laying her much smaller hand over his. “But we need to sleep. I think I’ll be able to now.”

“Perhaps you’ll find your dream again,” he said. “Dream it again.” His soft breath on the back of her neck felt just as sfera did in her hands and the light of the risen moon made his cape look like a shadow he’d drawn around them both, the only two who would find in it a refuge.

# Chapter 10

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The next day was slightly warmer, misty where it had been all crystalline clarity, and Opasnost's gait was closer to a canter than a gallop to accommodate the visibility. Alina thought Aleksander had whispered something to the war-horse as he adjusted his bridle and the saddle, something about taking it a little slower. They had a good chance of arriving at the Little Palace before nightfall according to Aleksander's calculations and he didn't make a practice of making mistakes. She was still sore and achy after the previous day's ride but she'd learned a bit better how to adjust her seat and was less shy about leaning back against Aleksander. Taken all in all, an actual conversation had become possible—and necessary.

"Aleksander, where do Grisha powers come from?" she asked. For a moment, she had the same feeling as she'd had when asking Ana Kuya where babies came from, the ones that weren't dropped off in a basket anyway, but she didn't expect he'd box her ears or mutter that she was a dirty, naughty little girl to ask such a thing and shouldn't she know better?

"They are within us in the same way we have the ability to speak, to see, to move," he said. "It's as simple as that. As natural."

"But where? And why doesn't everyone have them if it's natural?" she said. "Why do you say it's science and not magic if not everyone can do it?"

"You're very inquisitive," he remarked but his tone was approving.

"Everyone at the Little Palace must already know these things," she said. "I don't like to be ignorant if I can help it."

"Most of the younglings are more easily satisfied by the answer I gave you," he said.

"Perhaps they only act that way in front of you, the Darkling, General Kirigan," she said. "But that's neither here nor there, because I still don't understand where Grisha power, my power, yours, comes from, and how could I ever make a decision about how to use it if I don't know even that much?"

"It hasn't stopped the other Grisha," he said.

"It's easier when everyone around you is the same. It's easier to accept that's just how things are," Alina said. "I think so anyway."

"Shall I say it this way—would you ask where the power comes for you to pick up a cup and drink? To light a candle?"

"But those are ordinary things and the powers of a Grisha are extraordinary. At least if we are few and the otkazat'sya are many," Alina said.

“Then, do you ask the singer how she sings? How the poet composes?”

“But they have teachers and they practice,” Alina said. “Every song and onegin isn’t a masterpiece, nor even very good.”

“And we have the Little Palace,” Aleksander answered. “And before that, Grisha elders would teach the younglings where they could, however they might.”

“So, it’s only a talent? Because it doesn’t feel like a talent and it doesn’t look like it, and I don’t mean when you Summon because obviously you’re in a different category, but even the Grisha on the skiff...they moved as if they could see what we couldn’t, hear what we couldn’t, but even if we could, where does it come from, what they hear and see and do things with? Is it without or within? Very little or vast?”

“How the Librarian will appreciate you, Alina,” Aleksander said. “You have the makings of a philosopher and there are few enough Grisha like that, even at the Little Palace. You force me to admit the truth—I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?” she repeated, unable to hide her surprise. Seven-headed Azhdarya could have burst forth from the forest spitting fire and she wouldn’t have paid it any mind. “*You* don’t know?”

“You sound aghast,” he said.

“But you’re the Darkling,” she said.

“And I don’t know everything. I know more than many, I’ll admit, but I’ve had other things to occupy me. Military strategy, diplomacy, supervising the Little Palace. Keeping Grisha alive,” he said.

“How can you not know where your power comes from? Doesn’t that make you even more vulnerable?” Alina said. “Isn’t that why the Shu imprison Grisha and experiment on them?”

“It is,” he said. “But I don’t have a better answer. I’ve studied Morozova’s works and he talks about like calling to like, that which is within a Grisha finding its natural match or partner, something within the Inferni that lets them call fire, wind for the Squallers and so on.”

“Who can call fog?” Alina asked. “Because that’s air but also water. It’s wet anyway.”

“It depends on who is present, what their affinity is,” Aleksander said. Alina listened to his tone—it didn’t seem he was becoming angry or annoyed with her, but he was no longer answering as if he were proud of her for coming up with the questions. It must have been a long time since anyone dared to speak to him this way and she wasn’t sure he liked it very much.

“Do the Grisha only master the elements? Water, air, fire, shadow and light?” she said. She didn’t know but he would be sure to.

“No, some are healers and some manipulate form and fluid, the durasts and the alkemi,” he said. “And then there are the heartrenders.”

“What do they do?” Alina asked.

“They can control the workings of the heart, the organs,” he said.

“Don’t healers do that?”

“Heartrenders can kill. At a distance, without laying a hand on their enemy, in an instant,” he explained.

“What could possibly be calling for them to do that? To make a person a weapon?” Alina said. “It sounds terrible. Tormenting.”

There was a pause, only the sound of Opasnost’s hooves on the earth, the wind in the trees, and Alina’s own heartbeat thudding in her chest.

“They have saved us, time and again. In the Second Army, the Little Palace, in the raids before you were born, it was the heartrenders who kept the other Grisha from being tortured and killed,” Aleksander said. “They’ve saved more Grisha lives than any others. To weigh against what you call torment, those lives balance the scales.”

“They are the grain of truth, though, aren’t they? A reason the otkazat’sya should fear us,” Alina said. “They don’t seem like the others—”

“They are Grisha. They belong,” he said flatly. There was no way to turn to catch his eye, so she took a hand from the pommel and touched his wrist, stroked her forefinger over his pulse, remembering it fast and thready when he burned with fever.

“I’m only trying to understand, Sasha,” she said. “You’ve known who you are, who your people are, for a long time. I’ve only known for a few days and as soon as I found out—”

“You were nearly killed. Twice. In that regard, you are like so many other Grisha, Alya,” he said. “Too many others. But I told you I wanted you to bring me your question, I wanted to keep you safe and I cannot take offense when you give me what I want.”

“I wasn’t trying to be impertinent just now,” she said.

“But there are times you are, no?” he said.

“Not often. It’s too risky,” she said. Having learned that at Ana Kuya’s hand, she had not needed the lesson repeated in the First Army, where she spoke little and said less.

“You haven’t seemed to worry about the risk with me,” he replied.

“You were delirious for a while, so I wasn’t very worried about getting reprimanded,” she said and he laughed. She’d started to have a collection for his laughter, classified much as Vonlinné had organized the flora and fauna; this laugh was missing any bitterness, any worry. “And when you woke up, you weren’t like anyone else.”

“I see,” he said. He wouldn’t ask her to explain but she could sense he wanted her to. She thought for a moment how best to tell him.

“You wanted to protect me, not because I couldn’t keep myself safe, but because you could,” she said. “You listened, even when I was quiet. You called me Alya.”

He tightened his arm around her and she felt him graze her temple with his bearded cheek and then, so quickly she might have imagined it, with his lips.

“So, I wasn’t very concerned you’d demote me or assign me to some disgusting chores,” she said, purposefully airy. “Not that I loved scrubbing out the lentil pot.”

“I thought—you might have minded my wounds, the dressings,” he said. “You never flinched.”

“I wasn’t disgusted by that, Sasha,” she said. “Only, it hurt to see and I hated knowing I couldn’t do what you needed most.”

“But you did,” he said. “Without you, I wouldn’t have made it through.”

“Without me, you wouldn’t have been attacked,” she said.

“You’re right,” he said. “But so am I.”

They weren’t going to make it. The misty day had given way to a gloomy dusk, the sunset hidden behind such thick clouds the light was half-shadow as it fell around them. A fine drizzle had begun shortly after noon and Aleksander’s fever had returned, if not as dangerous high as it had been when he’d first been injured; Alina could still feel him shiver with chills as the heat poured off him.

“We need to stop for the night,” Alina said. “Unless you tell me Os Alta is right behind that big spruce. We need time to put together a shelter and you need to rest.”

“Over there,” Aleksander said, not even arguing with her about how close they were to the city and not responding with any particular amusement. The spot he pointed to wasn’t as well hidden as the place they’d slept the night before, but Alina would be able to get them out of the wet and feed him some of the remaining honey to keep up his strength. When they dismounted from Opasnost, he stumbled and she caught him around the waist to steady him. The stallion walked a few paces and began to crop the grasses and herbs he found. He wouldn’t run off even if Alina didn’t tether him.

“You sit here and don’t move,” Alina said. “I’m going to get some branches, the *otkazat’sya* way, and see if I can find any rose-hips for you. I won’t leave your line of sight, I promise.”

“All right, Alya,” he replied, pulling his cape around him. She didn’t like how exposed they were but he would probably be able to conjure his shadows to conceal them if they were in imminent danger. For all the protection it gave her being Corecloth, her red kefta stood out undeniably in the forest’s palette of umber and veridian, the dust and wear of the past days barely dimming its bold crimson.

She wasn't gone long and she hadn't gone far, as she'd said; she came back without any rose-hips but she bundled together as many pine and spruce branches as she could and carried them back, making a roof to keep the worst of the weather off of them. Aleksander looked tired and pale. Alina suspected that if she inspected his dressings they'd be stained with fresh blood.

"Let's see what some honey does for you," she said, taking the cask from the saddle-bag she'd laid beside Aleksander. There wasn't much left, so she added some water and hoped it would be easy enough to drink but his hand trembled, from the fever or the endless hours holding the reins, and she held it to his lips for him to drink, one hand at the angle of his jaw. His dark eyes rested on her with expression she didn't dare to name.

Before he had taken a sip, the two men emerged from behind a copse, two dark-haired men in drab clothes, without any weapons who nonetheless approached with the stealth of assailants, their faces grim, determined. Alina dropped the cup and lifted her hands to cast light strong enough to blind them, then gasped at the sudden, terrible pressure between her breasts, hearing men's voices shouting and her own voice, warning, choking.

*"Moi soverenyi! General Kirigan!"*

"Get away from him!"

"Sasha!"

And then, Aleksander, shocked, furious. Anguished.

"Ivan—no! No!"

## Chapter End Notes

Azhdaya is demonic version of Zmay (Zmey, Dragon). Created from serpent that lived up to 100 years or eaten another one. Usually in stories they have odd number of heads, rarely two. They spit fire, have terrible roar and have evil look on their faces. They live in caves or mountains, from where they escape and cause hailstorms or devour humans or cattle. They were so known in Slavic (and in European) Pagan folklore that Christianity adopted it as perfect image for devil - being greedy and hungry all the time and extremely hostile to all living beings.

Vonlinné = Carl Linnaeus (23 May[<sup>note 1</sup>] 1707 – 10 January 1778), also known after his ennoblement as Carl von Linné, was a Swedish botanist, zoologist, taxonomist, and physician who formalised binomial nomenclature, the modern system of naming organisms. He is known as the "father of modern taxonomy". Many of his writings were in Latin, and his name is rendered in Latin as Carolus Linnæus (after 1761 Carolus a Linné).

I decided to create a Ravkan poetic form called an onegin after Eugene Onegin, a novel in verse written by Alexander Pushkin. Onegin is considered a classic of Russian literature, and its eponymous protagonist has served as the model for a number of Russian literary heroes (so-called superfluous men). It was published in serial form between 1825 and 1832. The first complete edition was published in 1833, and the currently accepted version is based on the 1837 publication.



## Chapter 11

“What have you done?” Aleksander cried. He was on his knees, Alina held in his arms, unresponsive, pale, barely breathing. Her red kefta seemed to be all the color left in the world. “What have you *done*, Ivan? Alya, Alinochka, wake up, wake up, *milaya*—”

“I thought she was attacking you, *moi soverenyi*,” Ivan said, standing at attention as Fedyor ran over to kneel beside Aleksander. “I believed she was trying to kill you—”

“Not now, Vanya,” Fedyor muttered. “General Kirigan, will you let me see what I can do? I have some talent at healing and I know what a heart-render is capable of.” Ivan’s victims had a very low survival rate, he knew that too, because his husband prided himself on it and ordinarily, it was something the General relied upon.

“That’s what you did to her?” Aleksander said, his voice more tightly controlled than they’d ever heard it, the keening cry of the moment before completely erased. “You tried to stop her heart, to crush it—”

“I was trying to save your life, *moi soverenyi*!”

“If she dies—” Aleksander said. Shadows collected around them, beginning to blot out the sky, to muffle all birdsong and the wind through the trees, as ominous as the Fold.

“I can save her,” Fedyor said. “I can.” Aleksander looked down at Alina, still in his arms, her dark hair loosened from its braids, all the color drained from her skin, her face resting against his chest, as if she’d chosen to nestle close. Then he looked back at Fedyor, nodding very slightly. Fedyor crept near to them and laid a hand on Alina’s chest, frowned, and unfastened her kefta, pulling down the neckline of her worn, stained blouse so he could press his palm against her skin. He curved his other hand around her throat, his thumb on her carotid, barely paying any attention to how little distance there was between him and Aleksander, the leader of all the Grisha, a man who could kill him with one swift gesture. Fedyor closed his eyes and sent his power forward, hearing Ivan’s low voice murmuring in the background something that sounded like a prayer.

“Call her back,” Fedyor said, glancing up at Aleksander. When he didn’t say anything, Fedyor spoke again. “You’re the one she knows, the one who wants her to come back. Call her Alya, remind her you are waiting for her.”

“Alya, come to me,” Aleksander said quietly. She was motionless, her breathing even more faint. The tension in his voice was undeniable but when he spoke again, he’d softened it, was coaxing her. “Alinochka, *milaya*, please come back to me. Open your eyes, *moya dusha*, it’s all right—”

Alina’s eyes fluttered and she took a longer breath, then coughed. Fedyor closed his eyes again and stroked his thumb along her pulse; Ivan was a formidable heart-render and it had only been his ability to stop immediately when he heard the General’s exclamation that had made saving Alina’s life possible. When he opened his eyes, so did she.

“Sasha,” she said, hardly louder than a whisper. “Did they hurt you?”

Fedyor could not turn his head away to share a glance with Ivan, but he knew his husband had heard what he had, *Sasha*, said the way an intimate would. A lover. A wife. And then the first question about his safety, as if she would rise from her deathbed to protect him, as if she had the strength to lift her head. What had happened over the past week?

“No,” he said, his eyes flicking over to Fedyor who nodded and let his hand fall away from Alina’s throat. He left the hand on her chest, letting his power gently seek out the damage Ivan had done and try to put it to rights. “We’re safe, I’ve got you. Are you in pain?”

“What happened?” she said, not paying any mind to his question.

“A mistake,” he said. “These are my people, they came for us.”

“But they tried to kill you,” she said, a little stronger, still pale but her eyes were clear, no longer dazed. “I saw him, he raised his hand—”

“A mistake,” Aleksander repeated, as if he were trying to make sure they all believed him. “They are my guards. They were searching for us—”

“They are your guards? They are Grisha?” she asked. “I don’t, you said—do they have a Healer for you?”

“General?” Fedyor said. “What does she mean?”

Aleksander took a long breath, then let it out. “Fjerdans. They tried to kill our Sun Summoner again. I stopped them.”

“He was wounded. Badly,” Alina said, pulling herself up so that she was sitting in Aleksander’s lap, unconcerned about how this might appear to the two Grisha guards. “Four arrows to the back and he’s been very ill. His fever is back, he needs medicine and a Healer, he needs to be in bed, warm and dry and properly looked after. You are supposed to protect him—”

“*Moi soverenyi*, if you would let me?” Fedyor said. He waited until Aleksander lifted his chin in what could reasonably be taken as acquiescence, then touched his wrist where the kefta did not cover it. His skin was hot to the touch but there was more than a simple fever at work.

“She’s right, Ivan,” Fedyor said. “The General is still...in need of a skilled Healer. I can do a little, but not everything he requires—”

“Can you make me well enough to ride to Os Alta? If Miss Starkov can bear the trip?” Aleksander asked.

Fedyor looked at him, taking in his pallor, how drawn he was and the signs of fever, the painfully slow knitting of his injuries. And then considered the slowness of the woman held in his arms, the strength of Ivan’s rending, how her heart had fluttered beneath his hand, her chapped, bitten lips.

“No,” he admitted. “I wish I could say otherwise, but I am not a Healer by training, only affinity, and I could not guarantee your health and safety. For either of you.”

“You’re sure?” Aleksander said.

“Frankly, General Kirigan, I don’t see how you would be able to keep your seat on Opasnost, even if he were walking in a procession,” Fedyor said, daring to speak more directly. “And I am not familiar with Miss Starkov’s expertise as an equestrienne—”

“It’s very little,” Alina interjected. “If you want to call it expertise at all.”

“Perhaps if each of you rode with one of us,” Fedyor said. “Then we might—”

“No,” Aleksander said flatly. “That is not an option.”

“One of us must return to Os Alta and bring back a carriage, a Healer, a fresh team of horses,” Ivan said.

“I will stay,” Fedyor offered. “If either the General or Miss Starkov needs medical attention, I can tend to them—”

“No,” Aleksander said. “Ivan stays. You go, Fedyor. We are well enough and the greater risk is of another attack. As long as Ivan does not attempt to heartrend Miss Starkov again, we will be fine.”

“Miss Starkov has my deepest apology,” Ivan said. “I am in her debt, complete and entire, and I will remain so, until world’s end.” He said it in such a way that Alina realized he’d just made a vow, probably with his life and eternal soul on the line. She couldn’t bring herself to smile at him but she held his gaze in acknowledgement. They had both sought to protect Aleksander’s life with their own; there were far worse foundations for a relationship. The other Grisha remained a mystery, but Ivan at least she could understand and with understanding came a degree of safety if not comfort. She had also heard the threat in Aleksander’s voice; Ivan would not receive any degree of mercy or grace if Alina came to harm by his hands or through their negligence.

“As you wish, *moi soverenyi*,” Fedyor said. “Let us repair the shelter first and then I will hurry to Os Alta.”

“Do not speak of this encounter to anyone,” Aleksander ordered. “No one can know about the attacks, about my injuries or the Sun Summoner’s. Miss Starkov cannot be put at any additional risk.”

“I will be discretion itself,” Fedyor promised, risking the smallest smile in Alina’s direction. It had been a wise gamble as she smiled back, beginning to trust him for more than saving her life. His was the voice she’d heard saying *call her back*, encouraging Aleksander, who had believed in Fedyor enough to listen.

Grim-faced Ivan and Fedyor got to work on the camp with great efficiency, almost making Alina embarrassed by her own earlier efforts. She reminded herself they had come equipped with actual tools and had not been on meager rations for the past week while trying to keep a dying man alive. Aleksander looked far less impressed but he clearly found they'd done an acceptable job when there was a fire burning merrily and a waterproof tarp lay over the pine and spruce boughs Alina had collected. Fedyor had left then, riding his horse off into the night and Ivan hadn't even blinked though Alina was a little worried about his safety.

"We should have brought more supplies with us," Ivan said. He was standing across from them, ready to destroy any threat, though thus far, the night had held only the song of a rare nightingale, lost in the forest. Alina had a moment of pure sympathy for the little bird. "More food and medicines. Tonics."

"Kvas," Aleksander said, coughing a little. "Though I don't think that would do much good now."

"The other one," Alina said. "He'll be back tomorrow, won't he?"

"Fedyor? Yes, you need have no fear on that score," Ivan said. "Neither of us will fail you." If ever a person had wanted to give the impression of being an unbreachable fortress, it was Ivan and he was quite successful.

"Sit down, Ivan," Aleksander said.

"General?"

"You're making my neck tired, looking up at you. You can defend us equally well from a seated position," he said. Ivan dropped into a crouched position and Aleksander shrugged. It was clear Ivan meant to make up for his recent assault by protecting them even from the starlight if he could. Alina had seen soldiers in the First Army act so towards their superior officers and wondered if that was the case here or whether it was something to do with being Grisha, with abilities and bonds she couldn't identify, let alone interpret.

"I will keep watch," Ivan said. Alina, a junior mapmaker used to taking orders, heard the instruction *Go to sleep* and the pull of her fatigue, the day's ride and the taste she'd had of death. She wouldn't leave Aleksander alone though, no matter how what Ivan said. She'd sleep if Aleksander did, when he did and not before.

"I wish you'd eat a little more," she said to Aleksander. "There's some honey left and the comfits if you won't try the meat."

"It's all right, I'm fine," he said.

"It's good to keep up your strength, *moi soverenyi*," Ivan said. He stared straight ahead, between them, refusing to meet either of their gaze but his words and tone were direct.

"And so it begins," Aleksander said, glancing at Alina.

"I don't understand," she said.

“You’ve already made an alliance to manage me. You and Ivan, which means Fedyor as well, joining together to make me listen to you,” he said, sounding not at all unhappy. Was it an assessment or a suggestion? She could see he was relieved that the most recent attack hadn’t made her withdraw from the other Grisha or from him, but she wasn’t sure she agreed with the word he’d chosen, *alliance*.

“*Moi soverenyi*—”

“I’m not making anything but good sense, Sasha,” Alina said. “I can’t help it if other people agree with me.”

“Peace, *solnyshka*,” Aleksander said. “Give me the sweets and I’ll eat some. You must share them with me.” Alina found the tin and took a few, handing it over to Aleksander. After he’d eaten a half-dozen, he spoke.

“Ivan, what have you told them in Os Alta? About my absence and now yours?”

“It has been made clear that you had your own plans for the Sun Summoner’s arrival at the Little Palace, the details of which were to be kept confidential,” Ivan said. “Fedyor and I were away for a lover’s tryst.”

“A lover’s tryst? For two married as long as you have been? You didn’t feel it would strain credulity?” Aleksander said, shocking Alina with his utter lack of dismay about his guards’ relationship. In Keramzin, such marriages were rare and not to be spoken of, according to Ana Kuya.

“Fedyor can be quite convincing. He’s known to have a romantic streak, one I rarely seem to indulge. No one begrudged him and so all believed,” Ivan said.

“And who knows the truth?” Aleksander asked.

“Kostyk. Miss Safin,” Ivan said. “That’s all. If we had not found you, we would have spoken with Master Botkin and begun to recall the senior Grisha from the more sympathetic houses-- Aslanov, Garin, Molchalin-- back to the Little Palace.”

“A prudent approach,” Aleksander said. It was possible that Ivan’s ears turned slightly pink in response. “The Grand Palace? The Tsar?”

“Miss Safin has managed that. There have been no additional inquiries and I believe there is a hunt being planned that has the Tsar and his inner circle most occupied. The Tsaritsa is absorbed with a new riding habit, I believe. Nothing has been heard from Prince Nikolai, for whatever that is worth,” Ivan said.

“And Baghra?” Aleksander asked. Ivan dropped his eyes and pressed his lips together even more tightly. Aleksander’s own expression was tense; if they’d been alone, Alina would have reached over to take his hand or even touched his bearded cheek lightly. “What of her?”

“Dame Baghra has not made any inquiries, so no secure intelligence was offered to her, General,” Ivan said. “That is consistent with your past approach, *moi soverenyi*. We did not

feel we had any justification to diverge.”

“You were correct,” Aleksander said, his face relaxing, suddenly looking tired, his eyes a little unfocused. Alina felt the alteration in his power, his attention, and caught Ivan’s eye, nodding very slightly.

“We could try to sleep now,” she said. “It will be hours yet before Fedyor comes back and we have someone to keep us safe. Someone you trust.”

“I will keep the fire going and wake you if there is any need, General,” Ivan said. Aleksander might have argued but Alina yawned and let her shoulders slump; as she had suspected, it was enough.

“Come with me, Alya,” he said, moving fully beneath the shelter Fedyor and Ivan had built, supplementing the tree branches with a length of waterproof that kept the interior dryer and much darker. She could almost pretend they were alone, that Ivan’s back was only a stone outcropping, that she needn’t be shy to be lying down next to Aleksander and then to be taken, with a murmured *may I?* into his arms, curled on her side so they might claim the need of keeping each other warm as an excuse.

“You were brave today, Alya,” he said, his voice so low only she would hear him. “But I admit, it nearly destroyed me to see you so close to dying. I would have killed Ivan, Fedyor, blasted the forest if you had been lost to me—”

“I only wanted to keep you safe,” she replied. She remembered seeing Ivan and Fedyor, the dagger expression in Ivan’s eyes and Aleksander vulnerable; she would have walked into the Fold, into flame without thinking if it would have kept him from harm.

“The way you felt about your friend, on the skiff,” he said. “When you lit the entire Fold.”

“No, not the way I felt about Mal,” she said.

“Oh,” he said.

“More,” she said. “I felt more and I was so angry, that someone was trying to hurt you, kill you, take you—”

“I know, Alya, I know,” he said. There was so much compassion in his tone, she almost missed the surprise, that she would care for him so deeply and say it so openly. If they were alone...but they weren’t, Ivan guarding them allowing her to speak to Aleksander and keeping her from saying more. She felt sleepiness begin to overtake her, settling against her as she settled herself against Aleksander. He made a sound that was like a sigh and then said something very quietly, throaty, guttural words she couldn’t make out.

“What was that?” she whispered.

“A blessing, an old one,” he said.

“What for?”

“For sleep, for not wandering too far in dreams. For waking together safely,” he said. He repeated it but she still only heard the music of the words, knowing somehow that it wasn’t a lullaby.

# Chapter 12

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Alina woke to the sound of a distant rumble, a sound which rapidly resolved itself into Ivan, clearing his throat, almost certainly not because he'd swallowed an insect or being bothered by woodsmoke.

"They have arrived, Sun Summoner," Ivan said, standing at the opening of the shelter. "Fedyor and the Healer, with the carriage and driver."

Alina rubbed her eyes and pulled herself up on her elbows. Ivan looked exactly the same as he had when they'd gone to sleep, his clothes unwrinkled, his expression stern, despite staying awake for the whole night. She was somewhat taken aback that he'd chosen to address her instead of Aleksander, but it was apparent why as soon as she looked over; Aleksander was still fast asleep, his face turned away from her but his body was barely a hairbreadth's distance from hers and his cape still covered her legs.

"I'll wake him," she said. "The fever sometimes makes it hard to rouse him, so if you said anything—"

"I am here to serve the General. He owes me no explanations," Ivan said exactly as if she were the most junior member of the company who'd spoken out of turn. In a way, he was right, so she only nodded and started to lift her hand to shake Aleksander a little. "It's good he was able to rest. He does not often allow himself...respite."

"I wouldn't have thought otherwise," Alina said, trying to match Ivan's tone. She didn't get a smile but something altered in his eyes. "You might tell them it will be a few minutes. Even the Healer. I think he will want to be more...himself before anyone else sees him."

"As you say, Sun Summoner," Ivan replied. She knew better than to ask him to call her anything else and let him walk over to Fedyor and the carriage. She turned back to Aleksander, marveling a little that he'd slept through the whole conversation, and instead of shaking his shoulder, she brushed back the mussed hair that had fallen over his forehead, touching his temple and then the angle of his bearded jaw. She let her hand curve around his throat, resting at the nape of his neck as she spoke.

"Aleksander, it's time to wake up. It's morning."

He barely stirred. She felt that he was feverish, but he wasn't burning up and there was a skilled Healer only a few yards away. She lowered her face closer to his and tried again.

"Sasha, wake up. Your Grisha are here, here to take us home," she said.

"Home?" he said, his dark eyes still drowsy, the subtle thrum of his power waking to hers through her hand and through the timbre of his voice. "You call the Little Palace home?"



“It’s home to you, isn’t it?” she asked. He smiled, just a quirk of his lips, but she saw it. “Then it must be for me as well.”

“It will be,” he said, dragging himself upright and grimacing.

“You’re in pain,” she said. “I can call the Healer—”

“No, they’ll have their hands on me soon enough,” he said, seemingly oblivious to her indrawn breath, unable to keep from imaging her hands on him, even more than they already were, beneath his kefta and shirt, not healing, not drawing on his power to cast with her own, only learning the feeling of his bare skin, the crisp, dark curls that began on his chest and trailed down his stomach. “I admit, I look forward to sleeping in my own bed again. The virtues of pine boughs over a feather tick are sadly overrated.”

“I wouldn’t know,” she said. The pine boughs smelled better than a junior cartographer’s damp bedroll or the straw-filled mattresses covered in canvas no amount of laundering could rid of the scent of children’s piss.

“I will look forward even more to your impression then, after we arrive at the Little Palace and you settle in,” he said. “Come, Fedyor will have brought Liucija Balakina, one of the most senior Healers at the Little Palace, and she is known for her power, not her bedside manner. She will not appreciate being kept waiting, and she will give no quarter even for the General of the Second Army.”

“You go ahead, she’s here for you,” Alina said. A Healer would be real. A carriage and a team of fresh horses and a hamper filled with delicacies or flasks of broth would be real.

“I appreciate the sentiment, but I will be beside you every step of the way,” he said. “And after what happened, she will need to treat you as well. What Fedyor did was essentially battlefield triage and stabilization, not curative, as he would be the first to tell you.”

“Oh,” Alina said. “I thought I was all right.”

“You will be,” he said. “Between your own Summoner abilities and Liucija’s, there won’t be any permanent damage.”

“Will it hurt?” she said. She must sound like a child to him, though as a child she never would have asked the question. Who would be bothered about whether something hurt her if it were deemed necessary? She cut her own palm to keep from knowing the truth and hadn’t expected any consolation, not even from Mal. Aleksander reached over and took her hand in his.

“No, Alya,” he said. “She won’t hurt you.”

“What did you do to him?” Liucija Balakina, a keen-eyed woman of middle years in the red kefta of a Healer, asked. Hers, unlike Alina’s, was clean and fit her. There had been no

preamble to her healing and none to her question, her tone brusque, not that dissimilar from Ana Kuya's.

"Did I do something wrong?" Alina asked.

"Tell me what you did," Liucija repeated. Aleksander sat quietly between them on a stone outcropping, his kefta back on after Liucija had stripped him to the skin with a muttered *moi soverenyi by your leave* and a nod.

"I cleaned the wounds with water and bound them with what linen I had. It was my shirt," Alina said. "I made him some herbal tea, fed him honey. Lentils. I tried to make him sleep as much as possible, tried to keep him warm. It wasn't much. It wasn't enough."

"You did something else," Liucija said. Alina waited to see whether the other woman would elaborate or if Aleksander would say something, but they only looked at her.

"I don't know," she said.

"You called me back and you let your power convene with mine," Aleksander offered. "Your light moved within me."

"You're sure she's a Sun Summoner, *moi soverenyi*?" Liucija said. She sounded deeply skeptical.

"Light poured forth from her when I used the *kogot' khishchnika*," he said, as if it were a conversation of equals. "And she lit the entire Fold during a Volcra attack on a crossing."

"She has healed you, not entirely, but in some way I can't replicate. Or even accurately describe," Liucija said.

"Perhaps that is simply to be a Sun Summoner," he said.

"Doubtful," Liucija retorted, then added, "General Kirigan."

"Then perhaps Miss Starkov has no peer," he said. "Or the Library in the Little Palace needs to be scoured for any writing about someone with her abilities."

"That's for the Librarian to deal with," Liucija said, *not me* implied but unspoken. "I've done what's necessary for you. All that's left is some heartier meals and proper rest. You might also try harder to avoid assassination, but I've given you that advice before to no purpose."

"I am the General of the Second Army," he said. "It comes with the title—and the tent."

Liucija laughed then, a short, sharp sound that made Aleksander smile. How long had they known each other, how many conversations had they had over injuries and illnesses? Alina might have lost herself in wondering save for Liucija's sudden, firm grasp on her shoulder.

"I'm not done with you, Miss Starkov," she said, closing her eyes for a moment. Alina felt something in her chest, like the sweet coolness of water after a long, dusty march, like the stroke of a pen across paper, the line perfect, the boundary found, and then Liucija let her go,

her hazel eyes bright as gems. “That’s that, then. You might do better to avoid surprising Ivan again. It rarely goes as well as today.”

“I believe Ivan will refrain from assaulting the Sun Summoner in the future,” Aleksander said in a measured tone that was undeniably an order, to Ivan and also to Liucija. The Healer nodded and then smiled.

“You will have her taught by Dame Baghra? She will bridle at any restrictions—”

“Miss Starkov’s training will be determined after we arrive at the Little Palace. After I have had a chance to consult Master Botkin,” he said.

“She is a rite of passage for every Grisha at the Little Palace,” Liucija pressed. “Everyone must be cut at least twice, by the *kogot’ khishchnika* and by Baghra—her birch or her tongue. If she does not go through that—”

“Enough. Miss Starkov has her own needs,” he said. “We will leave in the next few minutes. Make all necessary haste. I want to arrive in Os Alta well before nightfall.”

“Yes, *moi soverenyi*,” Liucija said, then shocked Alina by winking at her as Aleksander stood and turned to look for Ivan and Fedyor. “There is some jugged hare in wine sauce, a number of spiced apple tarts in the carriage, and fresh bread and butter. You’ll have your fill of herring soon enough, little mapmaker. I’ll let you see to the General.”

“I thought the Healer would be riding with us,” Alina said as the carriage took them from the woods towards Os Alta. They sat across from each other, the hamper of food from the Little Palace kitchen sitting on the floor and Aleksander was sipping from a flask of water flavored with rose-hips as if it were a fine vintage.

“Most Grisha prefer horseback riding,” he said. “No matter what the Durasts do, the interior of a carriage rapidly becomes a prison.”

“It seems nice enough to me,” Alina said, touching the indigo velvet cushion beside her. The apple tarts smelled delicious but it seemed impolite to ask for one, even worse to simply dig around in the hamper and take one out. She looked down at her hands in her lap, trying to keep from looking at the food or straight at Aleksander who suddenly seemed much more General Kirigan inside the splendor of the carriage and Sasha a figment of her imagination, a man who only lived in an isolated cottage, a fairy tale she’d told herself.

“The roads are better the closer we get to Os Alta, it shouldn’t be terrible,” he said. “They’ve brought plenty for us to eat—won’t you have something?”

“Only if you eat something too,” she said. She would have said that in the cottage or under a canopy of spruce boughs, without sparing a thought, but now it was an effort and when she glanced at Aleksander, she could see he noticed.

“Of course,” he said. “Let me see what’s in there. We’ll have a picnic.”

“General Kirigan picnics?” she said. He smiled.

“General Kirigan is proud to eat with his soldiers and often does,” he said. “Sasha is pleased to have a picnic with Alina. Delighted, in fact.”

“Healer Balakina said there would be sweets, but no herring,” Alina said. “Will that meet with your approval?”

“You don’t need my approval, Alya, though you have it,” he said before he started rummaging through the hamper. “And I shudder to think of eating pickled herring in this carriage.” He fished out some linen napkins and then exclaimed, “Aha! Here they are!” offering a smaller, cloth-wrapped item to Alina who took it and set it down on her knees. Unfolding the cloth, she found a golden-brown tart containing ruddy apples speckled with spice, gaily decorated with icing sugar. It was quite the prettiest pastry she’d ever seen and almost a shame to eat it, but Aleksander was watching her again, so she took a modest bite and then made a little humming sound of appreciation.

“You like it, I think,” he said, smiling, his voice low and warm.

“It’s very good, I don’t think I’ve ever eaten something that tasted like this,” she said.

“We’ll have to see whether it’s your favorite when we get to the Little Palace,” he replied. “Whether you like apples best or something else sweeter, egg custard or the cacahuatl ganash from the Southern Colonies. Or a savory.”

“What about the simple, hearty food you promised me?” she said.

“I thought you took that as a warning—or a threat,” he said.

“A sentence,” she laughed. “When the kitchens can make something as good as this—”

“It’s not good for younglings to have sweets every day, but you are a Grisha grown and you’ve not had what the Grisha get as their due,” he said. “I think we may make some allowances, including what constitutes your just desserts, Alya.”

“That won’t be a problem?” she asked, taking another bite of the tart, licking her lower lip where a crumb lingered; she felt unsettled when Aleksander’s eyes dropped to her mouth and then when he looked away for a moment.

“No,” he said quickly and then, apparently reflecting on the expression of disbelief on her face and what he must know of the Little Palace, added, “If it is, you must come to me so we can solve it. Though you won’t be alone, I won’t be the only person there you can turn to.”

“Should I go to Ivan?” she said. “Healer Balakina suggested the opposite.”

Aleksander laughed.

“I see her point, but he has pledged himself to you in atonement,” he said.

“I don’t actually see what he has to atone for. He was only trying to protect you,” she said, finishing off the pastry and wishing she dared to lick her fingers. “He just misunderstood the situation. A lot. The most.” *Unless there was another reason*, she thought, unless it was because she was Shu, because he’d decided the moment he saw her that she could not truly be Grisha, even though everyone knew there were Grisha in Shu-Han who most desperately wished to escape, or because he’d decided even before, because he had not seen her light with his own eyes that it must be a trick, a deception, because to be Shu was to be a liar and a cheat if you were Ravkan. She didn’t say any of it because Aleksander would almost certainly deny it and if he didn’t, that might almost be worse.

“He won’t agree, though Fedyor will,” Aleksander said. “I will rest easier knowing he has devoted himself to your safety, especially during your training.”

“You said you would eat with me, but you haven’t, not a single bite,” she said. He shrugged, reached back in and took out a roll and began to eat. The welcome scent of fresh bread filled the carriage.

“There’s butter for the bread,” Alina said.

“It doesn’t need it,” he said. “Gerelt has always made an excellent loaf of bread and this is no exception.”

“You need it,” she retorted. “And to eat more than a roll. If you’re not going to listen to me, at least listen to your Healer. She told you to eat, to rebuild your strength.”

“I’ll listen to you,” he said, tearing another chunk off the roll with his even, white teeth. She shivered and tried to hide it but he had to have seen. “Would you get out more of the rolls and butter? We can each have one.”

Alina leaned over to rifle around in the hamper, on the verge of saying something about how it reminded her of a magical chest, one with endless treasures, when the carriage jolted over a stone or a rut and she lost her balance. She almost toppled off the bench but Aleksander’s hands were at her waist and his face was close to hers, so close it would have been nothing to touch him. To let herself fall into his arms and hope he saw the working of the universe in it. She felt his power, even through the layers of her clothes, but it wasn’t simply that his power summoned hers; she had the scent of him in her mouth, headier than the spiced apples, than sugar or butter or spirits and she heard him again as she had when she’d been struck, her heart like a stone, his voice saying *moya dusha*, claiming her, pleading for her return.

“M’sorry,” she mumbled.

“Don’t be,” he said, just as soft, his hands still on her. The carriage righted itself and pulled her back into her seat, forcing him to let go unless he meant to fall on top of her, pressing her against the velvet cushions, about to tumble down. To tumble her, his lips against her throat, the same lips that she’d watched to make sure he was breathing when his fever had spiked and he’d been delirious, the lips that had called her name when he was afraid and when she had gone somewhere she couldn’t find her way back from. “I want—”

“Yes,” she said, without waiting to hear anything else because what could he want that she didn’t want to give him?

“General Kirigan!” came a shout, a rap on the roof of the carriage, not Ivan’s voice and not the Healer’s.

“Yes?” Aleksander said, his dark eyes alert even if his mouth, so sensitive, so expressive, was still shaped to tell her a secret wish.

“Apologies, *moi soverenyi*,” came the same voice, that of the driver perhaps, unless Fedyor could sound so contrite and yet rough. “This road is impassable, we are taking another—we should arrive not much later, an hour, no more. We’ve sent the Healer on ahead, she said you were both fine.”

“Go,” he said, which was shorter than any other order he might have given and included *we’re all right* and *keep driving* and the look in his dark eyes that said she was not only wanted but beloved, a look she could hardly bring herself to believe.

“I don’t believe I’m hungry anymore,” she said.

“Then stop,” he said, letting her go, watching her settle herself back on the bench. “If your appetite returns, the food will be waiting.”

## Chapter End Notes

Liucija is Lithuanian for Lucia, after St. Luke, the patron saint of doctors. Her last name, Balakina, "refers to someone who is ‘very talkative’ or can chatter constantly," which I thought was funny, since she is rather clipped.

cacahuatl ganash = chocolate ganache

## Chapter 13

Alina had a full belly and a velvet cushion to sit on, the interior of the carriage was warm and not stuffy, and she'd just barely survived being heart-rended to death by Aleksander's personal bodyguard, so it would have been reasonable to expect to be able to take a nap but it turned out that Aleksander was right. She couldn't get comfortable in the carriage.

Aleksander seemed to have no such problem and had been leafing through a leather folder filled with papers, presumably related to the Second Army and the Little Palace, having angled himself to take advantage of the sunlight coming through the carriage's glass pane. Alina sighed, irritable and bored and sleepy, fussy as a little child and likely annoying him even more than she annoyed herself. He glanced at her and tied up the leather folder, setting it down near the hamper.

"Would you come sit by me?" he asked.

"I'll only disturb you," she said.

"I'll take my chances," he replied. "I don't think you will. I admit after what happened yesterday, what disturbs me is having you as far away as you are."

"I'm not that far away," she said.

"Still," he said, not making any other argument. "Unless—I don't want to crowd you. But I'd like it, having you near me. I could possibly even fall asleep, which you and Liucija agreed most necessary."

"All right," she said. "If you promise to try and sleep."

"I promise to try," he said as she stood and managed to get herself over to the spot beside him with the barest modicum of grace. Still, he'd seen her mount Opasnost without laughing, so she wasn't terribly worried he'd mock her or hide a smile behind his hand.

"That's better," he said as soon as she sat, her thigh pressed against his, though there was space enough for two people on the bench. He moved and made a place for her to nestle against him, for her head to rest against his shoulder.

"This isn't bothering you? Hurting your back?" she asked, already feeling drowsy, fighting the wave of fatigue that rose up and threatened to swamp her.

"Not at all," he said. "Liucija is very skilled."

"I think you're lying," she said.

"It doesn't hurt very much, it's only tender," he said. "It's so much milder, I hardly notice it."

"I guess that's good enough," she said and yawned.

“Close your eyes,” he said. “You need to rest as much as I do. And the journey will pass more quickly—we’ll be in Os Alta before you know it.”

“You close your eyes too,” she insisted, turning her cheek to rest against his chest where the sound of his heartbeat was less distant. She felt him stroke her hair before he spoke.

“I have, Alya,” he said but she didn’t answer because she’d dropped off.

She woke to the sound of a man crying, heart-broken, breathless sobs a child would make in the night when it was clear no one was coming to soothe them, a sound she recognized from Keramzin and had not thought she’d hear again. She turned to see Aleksander’s cheeks wet with tears and she reached up to his shoulder to shake him awake.

“Sasha, wake up, tell me what’s wrong,” she said, trying to keep her voice soothing while she worried—was it a nightmare or had Liucija missed something, was he in pain, in danger while they were still so far from Os Alta?

“You’re all right?” he choked, wrapping his arms around her more tightly than when he’d needed to keep her from falling off Opasnost at a full gallop. He bent his head to look closely at her face, bringing one hand to her cheek. “You’re all right, Alya, he didn’t—”

“Shh, I’m fine,” she said. “I’m fine, we’re safe, there’s nothing to worry about so—”

“He killed you,” Aleksander said, as if she hadn’t spoken. “I dreamt Ivan killed you and there was nothing I could do, you trusted me, you called out for me as he crushed your heart, I could hear the pain in your voice and then the silence—”

“Just a bad dream, I’m fine,” she repeated. For her, the attack had been a matter of seconds, of shouting a warning and feeling the tremendous pressure in her chest, then Fedyor’s voice and Aleksander’s calling her back, but Aleksander had lived through the minutes as years, as centuries, watching her be struck down by the guard he trusted above all others, hearing her voice and then holding her as she’d been caught between life and death. She tried to imagine herself in his place, holding his body in her arms, seeing him grow pale, knowing there was nothing she could do to save him... “You don’t have to cry, I’m right here.”

“I thought I’d lost you,” he said, more quietly, which made her catch her breath. “Failed you. I thought I was cursed, to not only to be alone, but to know it was my fault, to know I had taken everything from you, when you’d asked for hardly anything.”

“Dreams aren’t the truth,” she said. “They’re only dreams. They can tell us what we’re afraid of or what we want but that’s all.” He was braver than she was; he’d confessed his nightmare to her when she’d tried to never even hint at the paths her own dreams took her on, into his arms. His bed.

“I’ve burdened you with this,” he said but despite the words, he made no gesture to let her go or even loosen his embrace, for that was what it was, even if she could hardly bring herself to call it that.



“I’ll thank you not to underestimate me,” she said and watched him smile.

“I stand corrected,” he said.

“You’re sitting, but we don’t have to quibble,” she said. “It can’t be burden when it’s a gift. I know you’re older than I am, maybe it’s been a long time since you were unimportant, since you were someone no one cared for all that much, and even if it’s just because I have these powers, that I’m Grisha and not otkazat’sya—”

“It’s not just because anything,” he said.

“Even if it were, I’d still be glad, Sasha,” she said. He stroked his thumb across her cheek, letting his gaze drop for a moment to her parted lips.

“How shall I ever spare you when we are at the Little Palace?”

“Why do you have to?” she asked and she saw she had said something very right, very dear and unexpected, something he wouldn’t have begged or claimed or taken.

“For a number of reasons and I’ll tell them to you one by one if you’ll make yourself comfortable and see if Gerelt tucked in a few apples and a paring knife in the hamper,” he said, avoiding her so gently, she could hardly find it in herself to be hurt or offended. Impatient, yes, but if she allowed herself to imagine him making a declaration, she was somewhere between petrified and transported.

“You think it’s a good idea to use a knife while we’re riding?” Alina said. He’d rested his hands in his lap and crossed his legs at the ankle while she leaned over to awkwardly scramble through the hamper as they jolted along a particularly rough patch of what was supposed to be road. Sure enough, there were some ruddy apples peeping out of yet another linen cloth, a sheathed paring knife with an ivory handle tucked in with them. Gerelt must know Aleksander’s preferences quite well, though she thought she had Fedyor to thank for the pastries.

“I’ve a wealth of experience when it comes to spending hours cooped up in these carriages,” he said. “I don’t ride Opasnost everywhere. Trust me, it will be fine.” She handed over the apples and the knife then sat back so she could watch.

“I warn you, I can’t tear off any more of my shirt to bandage you if you slip and cut yourself,” she said. “As it is, they’ll think I’m a ragamuffin when I get to the Little Palace.”

“No one will think anything of the sort,” he said, peeling off the apple-skin deftly, one long red curl like a satin ribbon a girl would long for at a fair, that her sweetheart would buy for her to weave through her braids. She wasn’t inclined to argue with him about what people would think of her appearance at the Little Palace—she’d had a wealth of experience of people thinking ill of her for a wide variety of reasons, for being part Shu, for being poor, an orphan, the junior member of a little-respected division of the First Army. It was pleasure enough to look at him, see the grace of his hands and the little delicate shifts he made with the knife, revealing the apple’s white flesh.

“You were going to explain to me about what you meant,” she said, taking the slice of apple he offered and popping it into her mouth. It was crisp and tart unlike the apples in the pastry but just as delicious.

“When we are at the Little Palace, I have to allow you to have your own experiences, your own perceptions,” he said. “I may modify your training, but I cannot be your only teacher and mentor. You need to learn from other Grisha, from Botkin and the Librarian, who will see in you what I may not, who will be able to correct you as I cannot.”

“Why can’t you?” she asked. He offered another slice of apple and ate one himself before he answered.

“We are meant to be equals, my shadow and your light, we two Summoners. It is already enough that I am older than you are, but that will become less important as you become more confident in your abilities,” he said. “We must seek to achieve that balance. For our own good and the good of all Ravka.”

“And that’s all?” she said. “There’s no other reason?”

“It’s hard for me to imagine telling you that you’ve done something wrong or badly,” he said, shrugging.

“I’m not a saint, Sasha,” Alina laughed.

“You will be seen as one, Sankta Alina of the Fold,” he said. “But that’s not why—I have not had that many people in my life I’ve trusted. Who have been as necessary to me as you are. As dear.”

“Oh,” she said, wondering if he would say something else, something a man would say to his sweetheart as he offered her the red satin ribbon.

“When we are in the Little Palace, perhaps more than when we are in the Grand Palace, I do not want it apparent what you are to me, beyond being the Sun Summoner,” he said.

“I’d be a liability,” she said. “Or an embarrassment.”

“No,” he said very quickly. “I don’t want you to risk any harm by your association with me. I don’t ever want you hurt again. I don’t want you to suffer for my choices, my decisions.”

“And you think I would be,” she said.

“I’m the Darkling General of the Second Army, the master of the Cut,” he said. “I serve the Tsar. I am responsible for so many Grisha, held accountable to everyone and no one.”

“You’ve only done what you thought was right though, haven’t you?” she said.

“That’s not enough,” he replied.

“Well, the First Army wouldn’t argue with you on that score,” she said, hoping to ease the tension she saw in his face. He hadn’t answered her but he’d said more than he might have.

“Yes, I imagine so,” he said. His lips were still pressed together tightly and she thought of how she’d wiped away the tears staining his cheeks.

“There was a lot of grumbling about your tent, for example. And the fresh fruit the Grisha had. No one cared about the all the kvas, but we only got hardtack and meal and the occasional dried mutton. There might have been a mutiny over Kasaba melon.”

“I’ll take that under consideration,” he said, finally smiling. “Perhaps I can make some inroads with the First Army with some borscht and sbiten’ and hot-house grapes.”

“It would be a start,” Alina said. “I don’t want you to think they’ll be easily won over, though.”

“No?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head a little. “You may have to spring for some pastries.”

“Oh, Alya, you are sunshine,” he said.

“But you are the Darkling,” she answered, asking him *What am I to you? Most dear, sunshine, milaya, moya dusha, what have you declared and what won’t you acknowledge?* without saying the words. Without risking everything.

“Shall I tell you a secret?” he said. She nodded and he went on, so serious, so frank. “I’ve always been afraid of the dark.”

She reached over and took his hand in hers and they sat in silence as the light faded from the sky and the stars came out, one by one.

# Chapter 14

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

They arrived in Os Alta at night, the city quiet around them, the Little Palace hushed as if placed under an enchantment. As they entered through the gates, guards standing at attention as the General's carriage passed, Aleksander began to point out various buildings, the spire of Sankt Grigori's shrine, the university a hulking block on a hill-top, the merchants' district, this square and that, every name familiar to him and impossible for Alina to remember. The boulevard widened when they came to the grounds of the Grand Palace, whose golden domes barely gleamed in the starlight, "the new moon is the least garish it ever is," Aleksander remarked dismissively. An avenue of lindens led them to the Little Palace and Alina saw how something eased in him, a softening of his eyes, his posture no longer quite so stiff. He was home.

She shivered. The air around her was chilly, but that wasn't the reason why.

"You're cold," he said, shrugging his kefta off and draping it around her shoulders. It was warm from his body and carried his scent mixed with woodsmoke and pine. She wanted to pull it closer around herself but sat completely still.

"But you'll be—"

"I have a fur-trimmed cape," he said. "And I'm not cold but you are. Unless that's not it—are you feeling ill or dizzy? I—we can't take any chance with your heart, we can call for Liucija and Svilen, he is the other chief Healer at the Little Palace—"

"No, I'm not sick, not faint," she said. "Just cold, that's all." He'd said when they got to the Little Palace, she would think he had lied to her sometimes, so it was only fair if she was not completely honest with him.

"Then keep it on," he said. "If you don't mind the state of it." Torn by arrows, dusty, used as blanket and pillow, it was still a finely made garment and more importantly, it was his.

The carriage finally, blessedly, terrifyingly stopped. Equal parts refuge and prison, they'd have to leave it regardless of how Alina felt.

"Here we are," Aleksander said as the door was opened. He fastened his cape around his neck and stepped out, holding his hand out to help Alina exit. There were a number of staff waiting at the door and a short flight of stairs to climb, the remaining duration of their time alone brief.

"Can I keep it?" she asked softly, still holding his hand, knowing his cape and the distance concealed their contact.

"My kefta? But why—"

“I’ll be by myself,” she said, hoping that would be enough. That he would understand she wanted something of his to hold close in the night, something tangible that reminded her of what was real, of waking to see his face, his drowsy dark eyes opening to look at her, that first moment of wonder and relief and undeniable affection.

“Of course,” he said. “Someone may comment—”

“I’ll make sure they don’t, that there’s nothing to say,” she said, even though she had no idea how she’d make that true. She had to, if all she was to have of him was the shape of his body, the scent of his skin, his sweat, settled in against the weave of the cloth.

“Perhaps I’m asking too much of you,” he said. “No other Grisha would enter the Little Palace this way.”

“Haven’t you said I’m not like the other Grisha?” she pointed out. “That the only person I’m like is, well, you? You couldn’t have come to the Little Palace as the others did. You were also an adult.”

“I was the founder,” he said. “That’s not your role—”

“You didn’t know what was going to happen when you created the Little Palace. You only had hopes,” she said. “I don’t know what I’m meant for either, what role I’ll be called to play —”

“But you have hopes?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said.

“We cannot linger here any longer,” he said. “They’re waiting. They’ll begin to worry.”

“I know,” she said. “I’m ready.”

He nodded and they began to climb the stairs. He didn’t let go of her hand.

At the top of the stairs, an auburn-haired woman in a spotless cream-colored kefta took Alina’s arm as if they were young girls going on an outing to a fair, smiling warmly, her words of welcome homely and without any ceremony. Aleksander let go as soon as the woman, who introduced herself as Genya Safin, touched Alina, but the glance he gave her was one of approval. Miss Safin was someone he trusted, someone he wanted her to trust as well.

“You must be exhausted after your journey, Miss Starkov,” Genya said. “I thought I’d escort you to your room and let you sleep. We can meet again in the morning at breakfast—I’ll make sure the kitchen knows to send you a tray.”

“The Vezda suite, Genya,” Aleksander said. “I will want the Sun Summoner ready to meet with me by ten o’clock. In the War Room.”

“Of course, *moi soverenyi*,” she said. “I’ve arranged it all—I spoke with the Healers about Miss Starkov’s diet as well, since she is recovering from an injury, and have made sure the cooks know what to prepare.”

“Will there be lentils?” Alina asked, startling the woman, earning a sudden, fleeting smile from Aleksander.

“I can make sure the cooks prepare you a lentil pottage if that is your desire, Miss Starkov,” Genya said. “They had planned buckwheat kasha and syrniki with raspberry conserve, but it’s no trouble at all—”

“No,” Alina said. “No, what they planned will be fine.”

“Shall I show you to your rooms, then?” Genya asked.

“I suppose—yes, that’s fine,” Alina said. She’d expected to find it a change to live at the Little Palace but she hadn’t known just how deeply wrong it would feel to walk away from Aleksander at the end of the day. To know he was near but not within her reach.

“May the stars guide you through your dreams until the breaking dawn, Miss Starkov,” Aleksander said. It was an old blessing, rarely used since the veneration of the Saints began, and Genya Safin might well consider it a ceremonial parting between the two Summoners, but Alina heard what Aleksander was saying, just as she heard the pause before he said *Miss Starkov*, a small space that held his voice murmuring *Alya*. It was enough to hold onto when it was all she had besides his kefta around her shoulders.

“And to you, the balance of the rest,” she said, making the traditional response, startling him based on the subtle shift in his expression, one she felt sure Miss Safin would not notice. She’d found the ritual written about in a book tucked away in the Duke’s library on a rainy afternoon she had been assigned to help scrub the stone floor of the larder. She had wondered if she’d ever hear it said aloud.

“If you would come with me, Miss Starkov,” Genya said, using her free hand to beckon towards the open doors, a hallway lit only with candles. Alina was tempted to cast *sfera* to light their way but it was unnecessary and to cast now would only push sleep farther from her bed. Alina started walking with the other woman, down the hall, away from Aleksander.

Genya Safin didn’t let go of her arm until they’d crossed the threshold to the Vezda suite, the most splendidly elegant chamber Alina had ever seen, with the largest bed covered in miles of fine white linen and hand-made lace. She had a moment of pity for the laundresses of the Little Palace. Genya actually had to nudge her slightly to get her to walk into the room.

“I took the liberty of picking some simple nightclothes for you and there’s a pitcher and bowl to wash up with,” Genya said, pointing to a muslin shift lying on top of the bedcovers, only distinguishable from the rest of the snowy linens by the narrow blue ribbon threaded through the neck. The pitcher and bowl were delicately patterned with flowers. Any young girl might have thrilled to the room’s charms but Alina only felt an abrupt, overwhelming fatigue she hoped would translate easily to sleep.

“Thank you, Miss Safin,” Alina said.

“It’s nothing, only I hope you will call me Genya,” she replied.

“And I’m Alina.”

“No, you are the Sun Summoner,” Genya said.

“Not in here. I grew up in an orphanage, I was a junior mapmaker less than a fortnight ago,” Alina said. “I need to be plain Alina somewhere. With some people.”

“You honor me, Alina,” Genya said softly. “Now I bid you good-night. I’ll be back after you breakfast to get you ready for the day.”

Genya slipped from the room then, closing the door behind her so carefully it was as if it had never been opened. Alina took Aleksander’s kefta from her shoulders and laid it on the bed, where it looked like a shadow, a stain anyone else would want removed. She took off the rest of her clothes quickly, folding them on top of a gilded chest, pulled the nightgown over her head and splashed her face and hands with the water in the pitcher. Her hair was still in the braid Aleksander had plaited before they left the cottage and she kept it that way when she climbed into the bed and pulled the covers up, holding the black kefta close to her chest, pretending she was curving herself around Aleksander’s broad back. She wondered whether he was having any trouble falling to sleep without her, unable to imagine his bedchamber or the ominously named War Room he’d invited her to visit the next day. She could only envision his dark eyes growing drowsy and then the exquisite arc of his lashes against his cheeks and then, mercifully, she fell asleep herself.

Perhaps she had Ivan to thank for the dreamless night, the recovery from near-death overwhelming everything else. Perhaps it was the featherbed after the spruce boughs, the warmth of the clean linens. Or perhaps it was Aleksander’s kefta, even darker in the early morning light, that she’d clung to through the night. Whatever it was, Alina woke feeling rested, though still flushed from her dream of Aleksander in her arms, without his kefta, without a fever or injuries or any other explanation other than whatever he was murmuring in a Ravkan dialect she barely recognized as he brushed his lips against her eyelids, her cheeks, her mouth. The hollow at the base of her throat and the tops of her breasts. By the time she saw him, the memory would be dimmed and she’d be able to face him without blushing red as a berry. She hoped.

She got up to explore the room more fully before her breakfast arrived with Genya and whatever other staff were deemed appropriate to serve the Sun Summoner. There was a tall wardrobe in one corner of the room and a writing desk set in front of a large window overlooking a formal garden, a bookcase with a handful of leather-bound volumes, and the chest where she’d laid her clothes. The desk held a clutch of pens, an inkwell, and an empty book, for writing or sketching, the paper finer than any Alina had ever touched before. There was a door which led to a room with a water closet and a simply enormous copper bathtub and another that led to a pretty sitting room with silk upholstered settees, marquetry tables, and an elaborate floral rug that was like velvet on Alina’s bare feet. The Vezda suite was

quite the loveliest place Alina had ever lived and other than the sketchbook, it seemed to have nothing to do with her—or Aleksander for that matter. It also apparently had nowhere to safely conceal his kefta until she found a drawer within the wardrobe which had a little pewter key hanging from its lock; she hurriedly rolled up the coat and tucked it away, just in time to get back into the bed when there was a knock on the door and breakfast arrived.

“Good day to you, Miss Starkov,” Genya said. She was in the same or another cream-colored kefta and Alina couldn’t help wondering how she kept it from any smudges, the hems and cuffs as pristine as the panels of the skirt. Behind Genya was a seeming army division of staff, maids in uniforms and caps and starched, rustling pinafores bearing trays laden with great silver domed platters and an entire samovar service, maids carrying baskets of towels and baskets of jars and flasks, the colors of the contents gleaming like jewels in the sunlight. She had seen the Second Army moving around the encampment, but now appreciated the laxness of the commanders. Genya’s troop was organized, prompt and precise. It was rather daunting but at least the food smelled absolutely delicious.

“The cooks are hoping that you are pleased with this,” Genya said, lifting one polished silver dome after another from the trays. “What would you like to start with?”

“I’ve never had syrniki before,” Alina said. “It would be nice to try it.”

Genya nodded to one of the maids, who walked over and set the tray on Alina’s lap. She made quick work of the meal and drank the tea that was poured and placed beside her without needing to ask. It was arguably the finest breakfast she’d ever had and she couldn’t help missing the bland lentils and stewed apricots she’d shared with Aleksander.

“If you’re finished, we should get you ready,” Genya said, gesturing to one maid to remove the tray and the others to go into the bath. Alina heard the sound of water steadily filling a tub, a far cry from the splash of one kettle’s worth of hot water hitting the inch or so that was all Ana Kuya and the First Army allowed for what they called “a bath.” A complex, sweet floral scent drifted out along with the music of the water.

“I’ve been getting myself ready alone for quite a while,” Alina said. “My whole life, in fact. If you just show me what I’m supposed to wear, I can manage and you can do something more important.”

“There’s nothing more important than attending to the Sun Summoner,” Genya said. “And with all due respect, there are certain expectations at the Little Palace, especially if you are going to be meeting with the General.”

Alina pressed her lips together to keep from pointing out she’d just spent over a week with the General in the closest of quarters and there was no way to change what he’d seen of her.

“He may well have invited some of the senior Grisha or nobles in the Tsar’s court who are his allies,” Genya offered. “How you appear will reflect on him and all the Grisha in Ravka.”

“Oh,” Alina said. “I suppose in that case—”



“Shall we?” Genya said, stepping to the side to allow Alina to walk in front of her. Genya stayed in the main chamber, sorting through items she was hanging in the wardrobe.

Alina wasn’t especially shy about bathing in front of others but being bathed was an entirely different experience. Being bathed by maids, her treacherous mind supplied, as opposed to being bathed by Aleksander, whose hands had been so careful when he plaited her hair, so deliberate and deft; to sit in a tub full of bubbles and feel his hands stroking a cloth along her shoulders and arms and then down below the water’s surface, to be utterly still as he poured fresh, hot water over her from a pitcher or his cupped hands, would be as foreign from her current situation as she was from making her home on the Moon.

“D’you think she ever heard of a bathtub before?” one maid muttered, scrubbing Alina’s forearm roughly. She thought of the small pot in the cottage and the spring in the forest, the cramped wooden tub Ana Kuya brought out once a week and how much she had dreaded it in the winter.

“Smells like a stable, probably can’t tell the difference,” said another, under her breath but pitched clearly enough for Alina to hear.

“Her hair’s a mess, all knotted and tangled up, some crazy braid—be easier to chop it all off,” offered the woman kneeling behind her head, unraveling the plaits Aleksander had woven with such skill.

“What can you expect from someone like her, dirty Shu half-breed,” the first maid said, finally loud enough to attract Genya’s attention. “I don’t care how much she’s Tailored, that’s what she is and it’s a shame we’ve got to—”

“Enough,” Genya said, her voice with something of Ivan’s heartrending in it and something crystalline and sharp all her own. “If you want me to refrain from sharing your thoughts, especially as to what shames you, with General Kirigan, you will immediately apologize to Miss Starkov and then leave. You will all be reassigned; if you are able to work diligently, perhaps your families will not suffer for your stupidity.”

“But Miss Safin—”

“Your only remarks should be addressed to the Sun Summoner,” Genya said. “In the Second Exalted form.” This made the woman behind Alina catch her breath and drop her hands.

“Sun Summoner, Commander of Light, Despina Khatun, I beseech thee: forgive my transgression, my most grievous insult, and let me pass away from your notice as the dew is burned away by the dawn,” the three women said quickly, the one who’d nearly scrubbed Alina raw half-choked. They were all on their knees, their hands placed on their forehead where a diadem might rest, gazing at her directly. Alina had no idea what the correct response was and waited for Genya to say something, anything that would give her an idea of what was required while she sat naked in her bath.

“Go, now,” Genya said, all serenity. “If any word of this is heard in the Little Palace or the streets of Os Alta, it will be General Kirigan’s wrath you face and I suspect not all the intercession in the world, from the Sun Summoner herself, will make any difference.”

The three maids scuttled away while Alina sat in the cooling tub, somewhere between shock, embarrassment and awe, her fingertips puckering.

“I’m so sorry, Alina,” Genya said, sounding truly apologetic. “I should have been more careful about who I chose to serve you—you should never have felt that the people allowed into your private quarters would speak ill of you in any way or fail to appreciate what you mean to all of us. What is due to you as Sun Summoner, as a Grisha. As a person, whatever your background or heritage may be.”

“I can’t be ashamed of being part Shu, Genya,” Alina said. “It’s too easy for people to say something about. It’s the first thing I heard about before I was Grisha.”

“You were always Grisha. But beyond that, you know better than I do what it was like for you. I know though, I know what it is for people to have something to say about who you are, to judge and belittle you,” Genya said, trailing off, her blue eyes a little abstracted. Alina shifted and the water made a small sound against the copper wall of the tub. “Would you let me finish up? There’s a special rinse for your hair and then there’s a lotion to help keep your skin soft. It’s gets very cold here, very dry—I tinkered with the lotion’s recipe myself, only the Tsaritsa uses it.”

“What does it smell like?” Alina asked.

“The Tsaritsa’s is scented with jasmine and tuberose, fragrant cananga,” Genya said. “But I didn’t think you’d like those so well. Yours has lavender, chamomile, clove pinks. Things you’d find in an ordinary garden.”

“An *otkazat’sya* garden,” Alina said, inclining her head so that Genya could do whatever she needed.

“I thought you’d like those better,” Genya said, massaging some unguent through Alina’s wet hair and then pouring water through it. “I thought you might miss things like that.”

“My favorite are irises,” Alina said. “But those are nice.”

“I’ll remember that. We can get some orris-root sachets for your wardrobe. It’s the same fragrance,” Genya said. “Do you prefer white irises?”

“No, blue,” Alina said.

“That’s lucky,” Genya said.

“Why is it lucky?” Alina asked, getting herself out of the tub and wrapping herself the thick white towel the maids had left as Genya did something complicated with a thin muslin cloth and wet hair streaming down Alina’s back.

“Because this is your *kefta*,” Genya said as she pointed to the blue surcoat lying on top of Alina’s now neatly made bed. It was indeed the color of a blue iris, with the same luster of the furled petals and the embroidery at the shoulders and along the placket was the rich yellow as the throat of a blue iris. “The *Etherealiki* wear variations on this, with the thread

work indication their denomination. You'll fit right in with the other Summoners and only you and I will know about the irises."

"That's my kefta," Alina said. It was the first completely new garment she'd ever had, certainly the most expensive and it was beautiful but somehow she knew Genya wasn't right. It wasn't her kefta, only the kefta she'd been given to wear. Despite what the maids had said, she'd been raised with manners, a prim sort of politeness favored by Ana Kuya, and she wasn't about to complain.

"General Kirigan will like it," Genya said, which Alina hadn't expected at all.

"You think so?" Alina replied.

"Yes. He'll like to see you wearing something befitting the Sun Summoner, instead of those First Army rags or that worn out Corporalki castoff," Genya said. "When you're ready, I'll Tailor you and take you to him."

"Tailor me?" Alina said.

"It's what I do for the Tsaritsa and the ladies in favor with her," Genya explained. "I remove imperfections, scars, pock-marks, enhance dull complexions, redden lips, lighten hair—cosmetic alterations—"

"Don't change my eyes," Alina interrupted. "Please."

Genya paused, tilting her head to one side in consideration, then smiled.

"I hadn't intended to do anything of the sort," she said. "I don't care that you're Shu, only that you look as well as the Sun Summoner should. I thought, a little glow, a little healthy color, and a more secure arrangement of your hair without using a net or fixative."

"All right," Alina said. She knew coming to the Little Palace, truly being the Sun Summoner, would require her to change. What Genya proposed was likely the least of it and maybe it was true that Genya didn't care that she was Shu. Saying that was more than most would do.

"You'll still look like yourself," Genya said. "Only more so."

Alina didn't argue. She didn't agree that what Genya said was possible but she'd give her a chance.

## Chapter End Notes

Syrniki (Belarusian: сырнікі; Russian: сырники) or syrnyky (Ukrainian: сирник[и]) are fried Eastern Slavic quark (curd cheese) pancakes. In Russia, they are also known as tvorozhniki (творожники). They are a part of Belarusian, Russian, Ukrainian, Latvian (siņņiki) and Serbian cuisine. They are traditionally sweet and served for breakfast or

dessert, but can be made savory as well. Raisins, chopped dried apricot, fresh apples or pears are sometimes added into the batter. They are typically served with varenye, jam, smetana (sour cream) and/or melted butter.

Clove pink = carnation

Kananga = ylang-ylang

## Chapter 15

“Miss Starkov, I bid you good morning,” Aleksander said, inclining his head in acknowledgement. “I trust you passed a restful night and that the Vezda suite was adequate to your needs.”

Alina knew they had agreed to conceal whatever their true attachment was, but she was still taken aback by Aleksander’s formality. He had been less polite when they first met and he revealed her power. His tone made her feel she should respond with a curtsy or the brief salute used in the First Army when a superior officer spoke; there was something in his dark eyes though of the man whose arms she’d slept in, whose tears she’d wiped away.

“Very much so,” she said, striving to match him. “Everything has been done with the greatest degree of consideration.” It wasn’t a lie; she was sure the maids had intended to hurt her and that Genya had done her best to counter it. She did wonder how long they had to speak to each other as if they were trade ministers meeting in a foreign capital or at least how she imagined trader ministers would behave. Maybe they just met at a bar and drank the local ale.

“Ivan, you may go and leave whichever of the Oprichniki you deem suitable outside my quarters. The Sun Summoner and I will meet for an hour and I do not wish to be disturbed. Should anyone inquire, you may let them know we are discussing the Sun Summoner’s imminent presentation to the Tsar,” Aleksander said.

“Yes, *moi soverenyi*,” Ivan replied. He turned and nodded to Alina. “Miss Starkov.”

As soon as the door shut behind Ivan, Aleksander spoke again.

“What happened to you, Alina?” He sounded puzzled now and not a little distressed and she thought he looked as if he hadn’t slept well, even though he’d been back in his own bed.

“What do you mean? I don’t—”

“You look different,” he said.

“She said you’d like this kefta, Genya did, that I’d be properly dressed no matter who you might have in your quarters when I arrived or while we met,” Alina said.

“It’s not the kefta,” he said, taking a step towards her, regarding her so intently she would have been uncomfortable except for the fact that he was biting his lower lip without seeming to notice. “She Tailored you.”

“You don’t like it?” she said.

“You didn’t need Tailoring. Not to be with me,” he said.

“Don’t I?” she said.

“No—”

“You said I must, we must not be as we were,” she said, hating how awkwardly she was speaking. “When we were in the cottage. That no one could know what, how we felt...Don’t I need a mask then?”

“Not when you’re alone with me,” he said.

“Well, I don’t know how to undo what Genya does and I don’t see how I can get to be alone with you without walking through the Little Palace,” Alina said.

“You’re angry with me,” he replied. “The risks are too great—”

“I’m not angry,” she said. “Maybe frustrated. I don’t know how to do this, how any of this works here, but already, it seems like I’m doing it wrong.”

“You’re not. I am,” he said. “All you’ve done is what I’ve asked of you but I’m selfish, to say I don’t want you put in any danger and then to suggest you should do so, for me.”

“Does it look so bad?” Alina said, putting her hand up to her face. “I thought it looked nice.”

“You look lovely,” he said. “Genya does exquisite work. It’s simply that I didn’t think, I don’t think you needed any alteration. Except perhaps some feeding up—”

“I’ve always been scrawny, plain, I know that,” Alina said. Aleksander shook his head slowly.

“You’ve been ill. Malnourished. Your powers suppressed, turned against your body,” he said. “You only need to be given what you need to bloom.”

“Like a flower,” she said.

“Like a flower,” he said, smiling. “But I’ve been remiss—won’t you sit down? There’s no reasons we have to literally stand in ceremony now. It’s just the two of us and I had the kitchen send up a samovar and some pastries.”

“All right,” she said and settled the skirt of her kefta around her as she sat in one of the two leather armchairs he had in front of a fireplace. “But only the tea for me. I’m still full from breakfast.”

“Did you sleep well?” Aleksander asked as he handed her a glass of tea and poured one for himself, then sat down in the chair facing hers. It was such a far cry from the cottage she couldn’t help smiling, which he took as her response. “It would seem so. I was worried—”

“I was thinking how different this is,” she said. “I did sleep well enough, better than I expected to.” *Without you*, her mind supplied as well as the memory of waking with his kefta against her cheek. “Did you?”

“Not particularly,” he said, sipping his tea. His gestures were as economical and graceful with the silver filigree handle as he’d been with the battered tin cup in the woods.

“Were you in pain? I thought Healer Balakina was too quick to say you were better—”

“You weren’t there, Alina,” he said. “When I tried to fall asleep and when I woke up in the night, you weren’t there.”

“I didn’t, I’m sorry—” she broke off, flustered by his candor, by the look in his eyes.

“I said I didn’t know how I’d spare you and I still don’t,” he said. “That’s my problem, though, not yours.”

“That’s Volcra shit,” Alina said, so quickly she surprised herself nearly as much as Aleksander, based on his expression. “I’m sorry—I don’t expect anyone speaks to you like that here and I guess I shouldn’t, but I can’t help it—”

“Why is it Volcra shit, Alina?” he said.

“Because I slept with your kefta, Sasha,” she said. “Because I don’t understand what there is between us, whether it’s because I’m the Sun Summoner, or something else, but it can’t only be your problem. It hasn’t been and it won’t.”

“I wish it were,” he said. He almost distracted her from responding by brushing his finger across his upper lip and then along his jaw. Almost.

“No, you don’t. You don’t believe in making wishes,” she said. “Someone else grants wishes. You’d hate that, even if you got what you wanted.”

Aleksander laughed then and it sounded as it might have if they’d been back at the cottage but if he’d been well or well enough that she wasn’t studying him for any sign of a cough or collapse.

“Finish your tea and then we can talk about what comes next,” he said. If she’d hoped he would try to address what she meant with something else, she was disappointed, but it was such a pleasure to be with him, she couldn’t feel it, at least right now. Later, she’d wonder if she could bear to ask him directly without knowing how he would answer. She took a sip of her tea and set it down far enough away to indicate she wasn’t drinking anymore and then looked at Aleksander.

“What comes next?”

What came next was a rigorous roster of classes with Master Botkin, to begin with rudimentary Grisha combat skills, as the First Army’s preparation was deemed woeful at best, and a more open-ended course of study with the Librarian of the Little Palace, who would make sure Alina read and understood the basic Grisha texts and then guided her on more in-depth exploration of Summoning, philosophy, natural sciences and languages, starting with Kerch. What came next were daily Shatranj matches with Aleksander, which would be time for him to teach her military strategy and explain the complex machinations of the Tsar’s court, ending in a small meal recommended by the Healers to help her build her

strength and to help Aleksander replenish his after their recent injuries; he would also take her horseback riding once the stables had presented some likely mounts to choose from and Genya provided her with a riding habit. What came next was her introduction to the Tsar which must be carefully orchestrated.

What came next was every night spent alone in that wide white bed, knowing Aleksander was just down the hall and impossible to reach, that she would walk away from him every day and have to wait to be allowed to see him again at a scheduled time.

What came next was Alina doing her very best to conceal being completely overwhelmed.

She had trained herself never to cry at Keramzin, but if she wept in the night, she caught the tears in the sleeve of his kefta. Corecloth was designed to resist bullets; a little salt couldn't hurt it. Since no one at the Little Palace knew her well except for Aleksander, she soon had a reputation for being aloof and even the warmest of the Grisha gave her a wide berth. There was no Mal to run with her into a meadow, no team of fellow junior cartographers to gripe about shoddy materials and worse rations, and Genya, who was the closest person she had to a friend, spent the majority of her time at the Grand Palace. Which was how Alina found herself in David Kostyk's workroom on the Saturday afternoon before she was to be presented to the Tsar.

"Hello?" Alina called out, imagining her voice ricocheting around the room, bouncing off the many devices and pieces of equipment that littered every work-surface and shelf and hung from the ceiling the way Ana Kuya had hung twists of herbs to dry; there were jars filled with bits of metal or stone, some with a clear purpose and others Alina could only guess at that reminded her of Ana Kuya's jars of preserved fruit. It was a peculiar place and she felt right at home, except that the lights were on and she couldn't see a Grisha anywhere in the room.

And then David Kostyk rolled out on a narrow, wheeled wooden platform from beneath the bench across from Alina. He was lying on his back and had a smear of something that looked like grease on his cheek. There was a murky green streak across his purple kefta that defied explanation and possibly any laundering without the use of merzost.

"It's you," he said. "Alina Starkov. The Sun Summoner. You're here."

"Yes," she said. "I didn't mean to intrude—I can leave—"

"But you came in," he said. "So you wanted something, didn't you?"

"The lights were all on and I was curious," she said. David was still lying on his back and she wondered whether she should offer to help him up or whether that would offend him in some obscure way.

"And you didn't have anything better to do," he replied.

"I can go, I will, you're busy," she said.



“You can stay if you want. I don’t mind,” he said. “I don’t need any light Summoned though.”

“I can see that,” she said. “I can do other things, help out maybe?”

“I don’t need any maps,” he said. “You were a mapmaker before, weren’t you?”

“Yes. It seems like a long time ago,” she said, letting herself remember the scent of the ink, the mustiness of the tents, voices of the First Army soldiers laughing and teasing, Alina starting to be included before she’d destroyed the map and begun her journey to the Little Palace. David got up quickly and reached up to a shelf to take down a jar of what looked like gears made of copper.

“You should have a reasonable degree of dexterity then,” he said. “You can help me get these sorted.”

“How? They all look the same,” she said. She couldn’t afford to be picky—David was the first Grisha to invite her to do anything and she’d certainly had more tedious tasks at Keramzin.

“I meant you could help me install them in a device I’m making,” he said. “I know you are being presented to the Tsar tonight. Genya will be able to fix your hands if you break a nail or get any stains on you. She’s quite adept.”

“You’re sure?” Alina said.

“I am. Are you? You needn’t stay,” he said.

“I’d like to,” she said. “What are you making?”

“It’s not unlike a compass, but it has more than one point of reference,” David explained, cradling his creation in his hand. It had a glass face or rather, something that looked like glass but had some other aspect—the sheen of finely woven silk, the pour of honey. That must be his Small Science. It looked familiar in an odd way...

“Is this the only one?” she asked.

“No, it’s an iteration. I made an earlier prototype,” he said, then pointed to a crevice, “Here, I need one of the gears in this spot—”

“In Aleksand—I mean, General Kirigan’s saddle-bag, I found something like this,” Alina interrupted, catching herself. Would David even notice?

“Yes, there was that one,” David said, continuing to work, to hold out his left hand for yet another gear. “It needs further refinement to be truly effective at determining one’s location.”

“Did he know about it?” Alina asked.

“That’s an accurate assessment,” David replied, an awfully elaborate way to say yes, which made Alina narrow her eyes. David, however, was squinting at the device in his hand and

shaking it very gently, so he didn't appreciate the change in her expression. In response, the device made a little humming noise and then a chirp, as if he held a hungry chick covered in down, instead of the metal and crystal disc. He held it as she held her sfera and that was worth remembering.

"I see," she said. David suddenly became very still, the grease on his cheek more lurid, the angle of his jaw sharply cut against the rich violet of his dirtied kefta. In a moment, there was a ticking sound and the face of the device had changed into a very pale green.

"General Kirigan always knows what he needs to," David remarked. "You've been very helpful, even without Summoning the Sun. If you wanted to return, I would welcome your assistance. But the next steps are mine alone to take and Genya will not want to rush your Tailoring for the Tsar. You should go."

"I'm not wearing my kefta?" Alina asked. "But I thought the whole point was for the Tsar to meet the new Sun Summoner. A Grisha in a First Army uniform?"

"General Kirigan has given the orders himself," Genya replied. She was studying two rose petals with the intensity that Aleksander gave to the Shatranj board when Alina had nearly boxed him in, but Alina had only the faintest idea of what criteria Genya was applying, unlike watching Aleksander choose his next gambit.

"Whichever one you pick will be fine, I'm sure," Alina said. Genya had spent what felt like hours on her hair, making Alina miss the night Aleksander had braid it with only his fingers combing through, and had been working on her face for the next eternity; putting on the actual clothes would be the least of it, as it turned out, though Alina had been preparing to be trussed up like a fowl in various undergarments Genya would insist were critical to the drape and line of the kefta.

"I think this one," Genya said, ignoring Alina and holding the slightly darker petal up against Alina's mouth again, then drawing her finger along her lips and stepping back to evaluate. "Yes, that's right. I need to do your eyes next. I won't change their shape but you need something more formal to approach the Tsar. I won't do anything to disguise you but you don't want his first reaction to be to you as a Shu exotic the General is parading around in front of him. He must see you as Ravkan, as a loyal subject but unexciting as an example of womanly grace. And that means doing what I can to offset that veil."

"There's a veil? There's no veil with a First Army uniform," Alina protested.

"You cannot be seen by any member of the court before the Tsar sees you. That is the custom and the veil is the solution," Genya said. "It's the gold lace that creates the real problem."

"I'm wearing First Army fatigues and a gold lace veil?" Alina said. "Has everyone gone mad?"

"General Kirigan wants you in a First Army dress uniform and a veil. I wasn't given much choice about what veil to use—the gold lace came from the Tsaritsa's lady-in-waiting. If you

don't wear it, it's a grave affront to the crown," Genya explained. "I've devised a way to attach it to the shako so that it won't be too difficult to raise it up yourself and have to appear natural."

Alina shook her head. Her hair didn't move, which meant that part at least was a success. She would look like a fool but with any luck, she'd look like a fool in the way that Genya and Aleksander intended. Aleksander had explained she wouldn't have to demonstrate her abilities at the presentation and that he would be beside her the whole time; she couldn't help feeling a sort of pity for him that he would have to stand next to her in the silly get-up that had been ordered, even if he was responsible for much of it. He would still be tall and impressive and breath-takingly handsome and she would look like the lampshade she'd once glimpsed in a brothel's window.

"The turnip its top, the beet its root," Alina muttered under her breath but not low enough because Genya gave her a look that suggested she thought Alina had gone mad. "It's a saying, back in Keramzin, the woman who ran the orphanage used to say it if we made a fuss about anything."

"What does it mean?" Genya said. "Close your eyes and tell me." She started stroking Alina's eyelids even more lightly than she'd touched her lips and then Alina felt a sensation, cold as ice, hot as a flame, right along where her lashes were, which passed almost immediately.

"I don't know," Alina said. "Don't complain or we're eating nothing but turnip and beetroot stew? There's value in things we don't always appreciate? Or maybe it meant nothing at all, just a jumble of words to say when there wasn't anything else she could think of. If we didn't settle after that, she'd bring out the switch."

"Did you make a fuss often, when you were a child?" Genya asked.

"No. But I was stubborn," Alina said. "I just tried to find good places to hide. It helped that the punishment was no supper a lot of the time. I was never hungry, so it didn't bother me."

"Was it because you didn't like turnips and borscht? Or because you were hiding being Grisha?" Genya asked.

"Both, I guess," Alina said. "Are we almost done?"

"Almost, Alinochka," Genya said, using the nickname easily. She had to notice how still Alina went, even if she didn't know why, how Alina was hearing Aleksander's voice calling for her, a memory and the memory of a dream she'd had nearly every night since they'd arrived. Sometimes he wept in the dream and sometimes, as soon as he'd finished saying her name, his lips were on hers, the kiss of a fairy tale princess, when all Alina knew was the ordinary and the monstrous.

"There now, you can open your eyes," Genya said as she stepped back, surveying Alina with an artist's critical appraisal of her own work. "That will do. You can start putting on the uniform. I'll help with the boots."

“Genya, what if I make a mistake?” Alina asked. She took off her dressing gown and laid it on the bed, then picked up the uniform’s starched blouse and slipped it on, looking down at the buttons.

“I would tell you that nothing you say or do can be a mistake, because you are the Sun Summoner, but I don’t think you’d believe me and I’m sure it wouldn’t make you feel any better, however true it is,” Genya said, coming over to finish fastening the buttons for Alina. “I’d remind you that everyone at the court has made a mistake, some desperate, some desperately embarrassing, but you’ll just shrug your shoulders.”

“I’m going to mess something up, I know—”

“He’ll be there,” Genya said. “General Kirigan will do whatever you need. You won’t be alone, Alina. He’s—”

“He’s not the Tsar, Genya,”

“No, he’s not,” Genya said flatly. “He’s a far better man. He’ll listen to you—”

“Genya, you don’t sound—” Alina began.

“Not now, Alina. Now you have to finish getting ready. To meet General Kirigan and then the Tsar,” Genya said. “Everything else can wait. Has to wait.”

“Later, then,” Alina said. “I won’t forget.”

## Chapter 16

Somehow, Aleksander looked even taller and more imposing when he came to fetch her, more like the man who'd first rescued her from a Fjerdan assassin than the one who'd taught her to cast sfera over endless lentils. Alina was standing by a window so she wouldn't crease her uniform, though she couldn't imagine the sunlight enhanced the olive drab. Nor the black fur shako festooned with the gold lace veil but if she needed to look like a fool to satisfy the Tsar, that was little enough to ask; it wasn't as if she didn't feel like a fool half the time, as a junior map-maker and as the untrained Sun Summoner and as Alina who only wanted to be Alya and only to one man.

"You look lovely," he said. They were alone, Genya having left when Aleksander entered, and so there was no need for dissimulation on either side. Alina snorted and saw Aleksander grin, just a little.

"Is that one of the lies you promised me I'd hear at the Little Palace?" she asked. "Or do we need to call Healer Balakina to check your eyesight?"

"You do look lovely and however you feel about what you have to wear, I can assure you, the Imperial Court has required more outrageous costumes," Aleksander said.

"This isn't just to make me feel like an insignificant nobody dressed up to embarrass herself in front of the most powerful people in Ravka?"

"No. That's mostly the veil," Aleksander replied. "I wanted you in your First Army uniform to remind the Tsar of your origins and to be able to choose for myself when she first appear in a kefta at the court."

"You will choose," Alina said. "Not me."

"With all due respect, Alina, I have been General of the Second Army for your entire life and when you are shown to be a Grisha equal in power to me alone is, of necessity, a strategic military decision which must benefit the Second Army and all the Grisha in Ravka. The Tsar is not complex but he is impulsive and must be handled carefully. He is very responsive to visual cues, the pageantry, lights and entrances and grand gestures. If you wore your kefta today, you would be expected to cast sfera bright enough to eclipse the summer solstice," Aleksander said. "Even if you were able to do so, I cannot have you doing that now."

"Oh," Alina replied, embarrassed to have made any fuss at all when Aleksander's explanation was sensible and thorough, delivered without any of the condescension *with all due respect* usually forewarned.

"The veil is pure nonsense—he resurrected some old custom about the Tsar being the first to lay eyes on someone presented to court because it suits his preening and self-importance," Aleksander said. "He conveniently ignores what he can't deny, that I am a member of court and have seen you, that you have not been hidden in a convent. And the Tsaritsa taunts him with the gold embroidery, laying claim to you as she may."

“I feel I’m being led to a nest of vipers or Zemeni mambas,” Alina said, dropping her eyes to her hands, wishing she had something to hold onto.

“I told you, I’ll be right there beside you. And I know a thing or two about vipers,” he said. “You would have preferred to wear your kefta though?”

“Genya said it’s what the Etherealiki wear, that you chose it for me.” She walked toward him and he opened the door for them to make their way to the Tsar. She gave him a sidelong glance. “I thought you might choose black, to match yours.”

“At the cottage, you told me about your silk scarf, the one you lost before you crossed the Fold,” he said. “Blue, you said, like irises. That’s what I told Genya to get for you, a kefta blue like irises, silk lined with Corecloth.”

“For Saints’ sake,” she said softly, feeling her breath caught in her chest, feeling his eyes on her face, too flustered to look around and see if they were safe. Alone.

“For your sake, Alya,” he replied, just as quietly. “I have not forgotten what happened before. If anything, I remember even more. Even better. I appreciate even more, seeing you here, than I had anticipated.”

“Do you sometimes wish we were back there?” she asked, afraid to say *Sasha*, wishing he would take her hand as they walked down the stairs to the wide promenade that connected the Little Palace to the Grand.

“Every day,” he shrugged. She kept pace with him and thought no one regarding them would think there was any particular intimacy between them. “I even had the kitchen send me lentils, but they didn’t taste like yours.”

“That can only be a good thing, Sasha,” she said, unable to keep from laughing a little.

“Maybe it was the company I needed most.”

As they approached the entrance to the Grand Palace after walking in a companionable silence, Aleksander spoke again.

“Lower your veil now, Alina. I’ll let you know when you can lift it up.”

With the gold veil down, Alina couldn’t see as well but she was suddenly far more aware of Aleksander beside her. How close his arm was to hers, his hand to hers, how mindful he was of both of them walking together, making sure that he was not a half step ahead or behind but always right there. It was comforting and provoking all at the same time and she had to consciously restrain herself from blowing out her breath to make the veil stop tickling her nose. The hallway of the Grand Palace provided some distraction. She had thought the Little Palace the most beautiful place she’d ever seen and still appreciated the proportions and line of the Grisha estate, but the Grand Palace had clearly been designed to awe and cow every visitor, the ceilings soaring, every arch trimmed with gilded molding or swooping draperies, a

vast corridor filled with massive marble statues greeting any envoy approaching the Tsar. There were chandeliers filled with a hundred, a thousand lit tapers, and the scent of jasmine and roses drifted on the air. When they were possibly halfway there, a courtier in an elaborate uniform interrupted them.

“You must wait. The Tsar has other matters he must attend to now. Someone will come for you when he invites you to proceed,” the man said and then slipped away without leaving any time for a response.

“But didn’t the Tsar tell us to come now?” Alina asked. “Is there something happening with Fjerda or Shu-Han?”

“There is nothing happening. He simply wants to make me wait. What you must understand is that Pyotr is a child,” Aleksander said. “For all his wealth and power, he is small and petty —”

“He is the *Tsar*,” Alina said. “Of all Ravka—”

“He is an *otkazat’sya* with little talent and less ability, who holds the crown by an accident of fate. His over-confident mother was thrown from her horse during her first pregnancy and thus Pyotr is the Tsar. Though it’s likely the firstborn would have been no better,” Aleksander said. “He means to establish dominance, though this is so clumsy, I begin to wonder if he overindulged last night with that Kerch vintage the ambassador brought.”

“You think he is drunk?” Alina said.

“No. Hangover. It would make as much sense as any other explanation for the delay,” Aleksander. “More than most.”

“So we just stand here, I guess. Me in this silly veil that I can’t do anything about until he tells me to,” Alina said. She squinted to try and make out Aleksander’s expression but the gold lace made it difficult.

“No,” he said and took her hand. “Come with me.”

He led her back down the hall and then turned into an alcove she hadn’t noticed, between the veil and the gilded ceilings and the looming marble hulks of previous Tsars. The alcove opened into a small space that was nearly a room but not quite, without any furniture or decoration, only half-lit with what light spilled in from a narrow window high up on the wall. She couldn’t see any purpose for it but she couldn’t see any purpose for much of the Grand Palace other than to be grand and that wasn’t something she’d been taught to recognize in Keramzin or the First Army.

“What’s this place for?” she asked, her voice just above a whisper because that somehow felt appropriate, even though she couldn’t have said why.

“Sometimes servants use it to take care of any last minute alterations. Or if the Tsar wants more courtiers to seem to magically appear. And in a pinch, it’s a place for someone indisposed to retire to,” Aleksander answer, his voice equally low.

“Why are we here?” Alina said, looking up at him as best she could. He moved closer and she stepped back, so that the wall was right behind her and Aleksander was almost but not quite crowding her. He raised his hands to just barely touch the edge of the veil where it brushed her lower lip.

“May I? *Pozhaluista*?”

“Yes,” she said but she couldn’t keep a question from her answer.

Aleksander lifted the veil up an overwhelming gentleness and draped it over the shako, letting the folds fall against her unbound hair and then traced the curve of her cheek with one finger. His dark eyes held hers, intent and tender, and then he started reciting in a dialect of Old Ravkan he perhaps hadn’t expected her to understand, though the first text the Librarian had taught her was written in it. She heard the words translated as he spoke, still in his quiet voice.

*“My bride, my thornless rose, my harbor from tempests, revealed to me, this is our inviolate covenant: to be true, to be present, to last until world’s end, the doves in the eves, the tides to the shores.”*

“What did you do?” Alina asked, breathless, dizzy as she hadn’t been when Ivan had nearly stopped her heart. Aleksander had used a very old form of the most traditional Ravkan wedding vows, ones which bound the couple beyond any breaking, nothing and everything like merzost. “Why?”

“I couldn’t let him be the one to tell you, to make you lift the veil,” Aleksander said, angry and something else, hurt and longing. “To make it about his pride, to take the old ways and twist them, pervert them—”

“Why?” Alina repeated, the word like a prayer she couldn’t imagine answered.

“Because I wanted to,” he said. Admitted. He did something with his mouth that was like a smile but the light in his dark eyes wasn’t happiness. “Because I want you so much I cannot help myself, Alya.”

“You want me to be—”

“General Kirigan, the Tsar wants you to present yourselves now!” a courtier’s voice rang out in the hall.

“I promise you this is not the end of this conversation,” Aleksander said. “But we do need to go-- it would not suit our purposes to have them come searching for us, to be discovered. And you must lower the veil again.”

“No,” she said, startling him.

“No?”

“You do it. *Pozhaluista*,” she said, lifting her chin and making the veil shift against her hair.



Then he did smile and the light in his eyes was not happiness but a secret, safeguarded joy and his hands, bringing down the gold lace, were deliberate. Reverent. It occurred to her, fleetingly, that the gold veil was now the most precious item she'd ever owned.

Even on his throne, in his silks and furs and gems, the Tsar seemed unimpressive. Alina couldn't decide if it was something about the way his features were set on his face, like sultanas in a bowl of porridge, or the contrast between his glittering finery and his dull expression. She and Aleksander had come to a stop in front of the dais and stood there for a moment before she'd glanced over at Aleksander; he'd known she was asking for his instruction on picking up the veil and he'd given it with the slightest nod and then trained his eyes back on the Tsar, explaining Alina's background with the First Army and then gave a brief and curiously bland recounting of the crossing of the Fold. Alina answered the few questions she was asked simply, telling herself she was only speaking to the officer in command of the junior cartographers, which was true in a way and kept her calm enough to keep from making any embarrassing gaffes and attentive enough to avoid thinking about Aleksander beside her, Aleksander in front of her, his hands raising the veil and lingering on either side of her face as if he would hold it in his grasp while he spoke to her and then when he kissed her, murmuring *my bride* as he drew back.

The Tsar was not terribly inquisitive, which was a blessing. The Tsaritsa also seemed to find little about Alina worth remarking upon and all in all, the interview proved to be exactly what Aleksander had said it would be. She might almost have convinced herself she'd imagined everything that came before until they were dismissed and he took her hand and spoke in the same tone he'd used to recite the old vows.

"You were perfect."

She wanted to ask him a half a dozen questions and she wanted to just be quiet and let him hold her hand, to feel his shadows stir beneath her touch, seeking her light, as she felt the strength of his grasp, the callus on his finger from his hours spent writing to the Grisha he'd placed across the country, to the officers of the Second Army. Without the veil covering her eyes, it felt like too much to risk looking at him where anyone could see them. She'd wait until they got back to his quarters or hers.

When they arrived at his rooms, Ivan was waiting. He might not have actually been standing at attention, but Alina wasn't sure he had any other posture. Aleksander let go of her hand and she saw the shift in his face to General Kirigan.

"*Moi soverenyi*, Sun Summoner, if I may—"

"Yes, Ivan, what is it?"

"I know your preferences, *moi soverenyi*, and I beg your forgiveness, but I could not prevent it," Ivan said, sounding as if he knew he'd failed but also as if he'd tried to stop the sea from coming to the shore. "Dame Baghra is within."

"I see," Aleksander said. He frowned, glanced at Alina, and shook his head.

“Take the Sun Summoner from here, Ivan. To her rooms or the Library, whichever she chooses, and make sure she is secure,” Aleksander said to his deputy, then turned to Alina.

“I meant what I said, our conversation isn’t over, I don’t want you to think this is a welcome diversion. But it is unavoidable and it is not something to trouble you with,” he said. “Go with Ivan. I’ll send for you if it’s not too late.”

“There is no such time as too late,” Alina said, squaring her shoulders, making the veil swing against her shoulders. She wanted to seem resolute, calm and strong and anything other than plaintive and halfway terrified.

“If only that were true,” he said, very low. And then, “Ivan, I thank you for your forethought.”

“As ever, I serve you, General. And I’m sworn to the Sun Summoner,” Ivan said, looking at Alina as if he was waiting for her to give him an order. There was a rustling noise within Aleksander’s chambers. “Miss Starkov, shall we go?”

Despite their history, or perhaps because of it, given the way Ivan had said *Dame Baghra* and the bleak look in Aleksander’s eyes, Alina found herself glad it was stern Ivan walking beside her and not the more cheerful Fedyor; Fedyor had saved her life but she knew Ivan would not hesitate to kill anyone who threatened her. And evidently, that might include the mysterious Dame Baghra.

# Chapter 17

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“I’d rather go to the Library, but not like this,” Alina said, gesturing at her First Army uniform. “Could we go to the Vezda suite first so I can change quickly?” If Ivan thought it was odd she said the Vezda suite and not *my rooms*, there was certainly no way to tell.

“You do not have to make requests of me, Miss Starkov. I take my orders from you,” he said.

“But only if General Kirigan approves,” she replied. “If it came to it, you would do what he told you, not me.”

“That would be...a complex situation. One I cannot imagine encountering,” he said. Alina glanced up at him. His eyes were dark but not brown like her own or black as Aleksander’s. Ivan’s were a very deep grey like stone wet with rain or the sky filled with storm-clouds. He could imagine it, had imagined it, she saw that, as well as noticing that he hadn’t decided what he would do if it happened, what duty was supreme, and it troubled him though he wouldn’t admit it. Not even to Fedyor.

“You have more pressing matters to occupy your thoughts,” she offered. “Rather than hypotheticals.”

He looked almost thankful she’d given him an out instead of pressing him to dissect which obligation was greater, his duty to Aleksander, his General, the leader of the Grisha, and the oath he’d sworn to Alina after nearly killing her.

“I’ll only be a few minutes,” she said, since they’d come to the door of the Vezda suite.

“No,” he said. “I go first if there is no maid within to open it.” He didn’t look fierce, only grim, and she wondered how many assassination attempts on Aleksander’s life he’d foiled. She let him pass in front of her and waited for him to call out that she might enter. Once she stepped inside, he withdrew.

When Genya had first pinned the veil to the shako, Alina had imagined tearing it off afterward and wadding it up and throwing it into a corner of the suite for Genya or the maids to find and shrug over, but Aleksander had transformed it into something precious with his hands and his voice and his dark eyes watching her face. Alina took the fur hat off her hair and unlatched the catch of the brooch, then let the shako fall to her bed and folded the veil as carefully as she would have touched Aleksander’s face, tracing the line of his jaw, the delicate skin of his closed eyelids, the bridge of his nose, his lower lip. She put it away in the same locked chest she kept his kefta in and then hurried to shed the First Army uniform and throw on a shirt, trousers and her blue kefta over it all. Her hair and face were still Tailored, but the Librarian was unlikely to make any remarks.

“You didn’t need to rush, Sun Summoner,” Ivan said as she walked out of the room. “Not because you think I am impatient or have something more important to do.”

“But General Kirigan—”

“General Kirigan would not have dispatched me if he felt I was needed at his side,” Ivan replied.

“The way you spoke of Dame Baghra, I don’t know, it made me uneasy,” Alina said, working to match her pace to his.

“No Grisha would blame you for that,” he replied. “It has been many years since my own training with her and I wouldn’t want to relive it.”

“General Kirigan has not introduced me to her,” Alina said.

“However soon you meet her will be soon enough,” Ivan said. Alina sensed this was as informal as he was likely to be with her or perhaps anyone other than Fedyor. They’d arrived at the Library and she went over to the table that had become hers, Ivan nodding at the Librarian when he was told the security measures were all in place. The texts she had been studying were still stacked where she’d left them and she told herself she’d immerse herself in the philosophy treatise she’d been reading and let everything else fall away.

It was a miserable failure.

First, Alina told herself it was the chair and she wriggled around in it trying to find some ideal position that would let her focus her attention without it making a lick of difference. She moved the treatise around, picked up her pen, put it down, dipped it in the inkwell, wrote *Notes on Treatise of Merzost and Zalitnuud*, underscored it and made a tick mark with nothing to follow. She fiddled with a piece of her hair which was not loose in the least, until it was loose in the least and then she brushed the end across her cheekbone and sighed and took a series of deep breaths and even conjured a sfera the size of an onion beneath the table and worked to keep the light the even dimness of a winter dawn, but while she felt marginally better and would happily have eaten a roasted onion with good appetite, she was no more able to concentrate than when she’d started.

She’d asked Aleksander *what have you done?* because there was part of her that suspected it was enough for him to have recited the vows, that he hadn’t simply said some beautiful words or proposed but actually joined them in some attachment that couldn’t be broken, a marriage or a bond that went beyond what any otkazat’sya would consider a marriage. There was part of her that hoped he had, that he’d done something irrevocable that would mean she could go to him or he could come to her and it wouldn’t need to be concealed or barely tolerated, but required, accepted, celebrated. And there was part of her that felt she was tipping on the edge of an abyss, one she could never light to its utmost depth, no matter how hard she tried, and she couldn’t tell if Aleksander was trying to pull her back or push her in.

“Making faces won’t help,” the Librarian commented. Alina had not been able to divine whether the Librarian was a man or a woman, a Grisha or some creature willing to work alongside Grisha, but Togtuun was patient, prescient, delighted with Alina’s endless

questions, and only annoyed by a disregard for the proper care and shelving of the books given to Alina for review. Alina supposed that last might be a characteristic of any good Librarian, as a stablemaster might fuss over his horses and a Healer the proper preparation and storage of their pharmacopeia. “The treatise won’t mind that grimace, but it won’t give up its secrets any sooner.”

“I’m sorry, I’m bothering you,” Alina said.

“You’re not but I can see you cannot do the work you wanted to. Cannot lose yourself as you wished,” Togtuun said.

“You can see all that, even through the Tailoring?”

“The Tailoring was for the Tsar,” Togtuun said, adjusting the cowl of their deep brown kefta, as unlike the Apparat’s habit as rich loam was to ash. “Nothing about you looks different to me, except that you’ve had some sort of a shock, beyond the discovery of your light.”

“That’s not wrong,” Alina said.

“Stop reading and draw,” Togtuun said. “Let your hand guide your mind until you can ask the question you need, of the one you need to ask.”

“I should leave—”

“You don’t have to,” Togtuun said. “The Library is not only for reading. You need to think and you can’t think how. See what the ink says to your palm, what your palm says to your eyes. The treatise has no feet, it won’t run away from you.”

“That would be the most terrifying thing I’ve seen at the Little Palace,” Alina said, smiling.

“Would it?” Togtuun said. Alina dropped her gaze, looking at the pages open in front of her, seeing Aleksander’s lips as he praised her *my thornless rose, my harbor*, and his face as he turned away from her to walk into his quarters.

“When you’ve finished drawing, open the treatise. See what words rise to greet you,” Togtuun suggested. “I’ll be in the light fiction section. Some of the younger Grisha left a mess looking for the third volume in the Princess and the Barbarian series.”

Alina remembered the bold cover, the bright hair of the Barbarian, the Princess’s heaving, unbound bosom.

“But you’re reading that one, I saw it on your desk,” she said.

“Just so. A passel of randy Inferni needn’t know that though. I have a certain reputation to maintain and I don’t feel like being interrogated as to whom I prefer, Barbarian or Princess,” Togtuun said, so warm, so approachable, so remote. With a swirl of her russet kefta that Alina had only ever seen Aleksander match, Togtuun retreated and Alina was left to her table, her inkwell and a blank sheet of paper. She sat in the shaft of sunlight that brought her own light up shimmer along her blood and bones and then picked up the pen and began to draw.

She drew hands, Aleksander's hands, gesturing, conjuring shadows yes, and held aloft to perform the Cut, but also taking a cup, picking out a single comfit, reaching out to help her from the carriage, to help her up onto Opasnost's back. She drew his hands as she'd seen them and as she'd only felt them, weaving her hair into plaits, stroking her back as he woke from the nightmare of her death, lifting the gold veil above her brow. As she'd dreamt them, stroking across her lower lip and laid against her beating heart, resting on her waist as she perched above him, brushing back her loose hair as it grazed his bare chest and shoulders, circling her wrists to clasp the wedding bracelets there.

She drew his face, sleeping, the young boy he'd once been still visible in the delicacy of his lashes, the aching curve of his cheek, the man he'd become visible in the shape of his lips, the angle of his bearded jaw. She drew his face, waking to see her, his expression wonder and joy and the fear of losing everything, Aleksander's face transformed from Kirigan to Sasha. She drew his face as he'd regarded her when he spoke the old words, hoping she would understand, expecting her confusion, the claim there and the desperate need to protect her, to be welcomed, to be seen in return as he'd spoken of her, *doves in the eaves*, the long, sweet call heard at nightfall and dawn.

The table was covered with the sketches, every page used, surrounding her. She opened the treatise and glanced down, willing to see whatever her eye landed upon. Not because there would be a message, as some of the Grisha played at, but simply to drift among the words as she had the images. It was a relatively dry piece of writing, one she had to work to understand at the best of times and she couldn't have said this was one, but still she let herself look.

"The fool is as wise as the year of his birth."

Alina held the words in her mind, said them to herself. How old was Aleksander and what had he lived through before they met? Had he brothers, sisters, cousins or parents? What would he say constituted wisdom—and would she agree? Had he ever read this same book, caught by these same words as a rabbit in a snare?

If she came to his rooms and asked to be let in, to ask these questions and all the others, would he open the door—or send her away?

He came to her. There was a knock on the door shortly after she'd returned from the Library and just after she'd shucked off her kefta in favor of the ivory kashmir tunic Genya had hung in the wardrobe, a garment not unlike one she'd have worn growing up, except that the yarn was too soft and finely knitted to have ever been used for an orphan or even a well-off otkazat'sya. She was alone and he noticed it right away, his expression darkening.

"You shouldn't—"

"Ivan has a security perimeter and checked the suite before he left. I told him I needed some time by myself," she said. He pressed his lips together and his posture stiffened.

"I shall leave you then," he said.

“Aleksander, I didn’t mean you,” she said.

“I was going to invite you to come riding with me,” he replied, a little more easily.

“You said our conversation wasn’t over,” Alina said. “And then Dame Baghra was in your rooms and you sent me away and now you want to go riding? Being at the Little Palace has not suddenly made me a skilled rider—”

“I want to talk to you outside the Little Palace. Alone. Somewhere safe, private,” he said.

“You don’t want to talk here?”

“I have my reasons,” he said. “I spoke with Genya and she knows you will be with me and returning later. If anyone asks, she will say you are indisposed and taking your dinner in your room. Will you come with me?”

“You ask as if you think I might refuse,” she said. He shrugged, his lips quirking for just a moment in a faint smile, a man and not the General, not the most powerful Grisha in Ravka.

“You may, Alina. I don’t command you,” he said.

“How could I refuse my own heart?” she said. If she thought he might have closed the distance between them then, taken her two hands in his or cupped her face between his palms, she was wrong but she felt all the ordinary shadows in the room suddenly tremble with the spill of his power, become deeper and sweeter, almost as if he’d kissed her. Almost.

“Put on your kefta then and we’ll go. I’ve found a horse for you to ride, one Opasnost is familiar with, well-trained. Manageable, certainly for the distance we will go,” he said.

“We aren’t riding together?”

“We are, but you must have your own mount. Your own freedom,” he said. “I don’t want—I never want to take that from you, for you to feel I have. I know how that feels, how much damage it does.”

“What you have to say is so terrible? I thought, at court, that was what you wanted. All of it,” she replied, fastening her kefta, looking down at her hands working. *The fool is as wise* tumbled through her head and then *doves in the eaves*, the Tsar’s voice a little reedy, ordering her to *Come forward*. Aleksander’s voice as they left, saying *You were perfect*.

“It’s not only about what I want, however much I want it, Alina,” he said. “But let us talk more a little later.” She nodded and they walked out to where the horses were waiting. Once they had left the Little Palace, when the air itself could conceal her question, she spoke again.

“I thought we were safe here, at the Little Palace. In all Ravka, in all the world, there was nowhere safer for us,” she said, not bothering to specify whether she meant all the Grisha or only the two of them, the paired Summoners with their balanced powers.

“I thought we were safe here too,” he said. “I will not risk you on my beliefs. I’ve made too many mistakes before.”

## Chapter End Notes

Zalitnuud = trickery (Mongolian)

Togtuun = unisex name which means "calm, serene"



## Chapter 18

The horses were tethered, quietly cropping the grass, and Aleksander stood next to the empty fountain, his hand resting on the stone rim, the light catching the silver ring he'd cut her with a lifetime ago.

"We are safe to speak freely here," he said. "No one living remembers this place—I came here as a boy, to be alone. Ask me whatever you will."

"Why do we have to talk here?" Alina said, looking around the secluded dell that held the fountain and a low stone bench. She was more than an arm's length away; if he wanted to touch her, he would have to move towards her or beckon her to come to him. Wait to see if she would.

"I'll tell you but is that truly the first question you wish to ask, Alina?" he said. She shook her head, remembered the shimmer of the veil, the touch of the lace against her cheeks. His hands, his eyes.

"Am I your wife now?" He made a sound a little like choking, caught his breath and then bit his lip.

"You understood," he said. "What I said to you. What it meant."

"Are you disappointed or relieved?" she asked. "Even if I hadn't learned the old tongue, I would have wondered, the look in your eyes, the way you spoke—"

"I hoped, without letting myself. I wished, without allowing it might come true," he said. "But no, I have not bound you to me without your consent."

"Did you maybe consider asking for it?" she said, wanting to sound as if it didn't cost her anything to say it. To be as confident and glib as the Squaller on the skiff, the Grisha called Zoya, who wore her cobalt kefta as if it were the Tsaritsa's ermine mantle. "I understand it's called a proposal."

"You may not believe me, but it was an impulse, an urge I could not resist when I saw you veiled, Alina. So beautiful, gifted, innocent—"

"An urge—has it passed? Was it only the veil and the Tsar—"

"No," he said quickly. "No, it's what I want. You, I want you. The words I spoke, the ritual, I couldn't help myself, they all meant you, Alya, my rose—"

"Your bride?"

"Moloch succor thy son, yes. Yes," he said, the old-fashioned exclamation somehow sounding perfectly natural and the yes sounding like he'd never let himself say it aloud before.

“Then ask me,” she said.

“You would answer? Say yes?” he said.

“I don’t know,” she said. “You haven’t asked. And you’ve never kissed me, not properly, though I suppose that doesn’t matter so much.”

“It matters,” he said, his eyes dropping to her lips for a moment but he still didn’t move one step closer. She walked over to him, laid her hands against the collar of his kefta and glanced briefly at his eyes, his mouth. And then she kissed him, very softly but with her lips parted so he would feel her invitation, her desire, as he seemed so concerned about not overstepping any boundaries. Not overwhelming her with his own need and power. She kept her fingers just touching his jaw, guiding him to her without any pressure and she felt the change when he allowed himself to kiss her back, the way he suddenly wanted her, moving just that much nearer, still only tender but with a rush of consuming heat that was not only lust but adoration.

“Are you sure?” he whispered, pulling back enough to look at her eyes. To give her the space to retreat. She nodded at him and within the next second, wondered what she had said she was sure of—his care? Her own affection? Her willingness to leave all pretense behind?

Because Aleksander given her permission was a version of himself she had only dimly imagined. What had been tender, delicate, almost diffident, was now utterly transformed as he took her in his arms, a hand at her cheek and then in her hair, her shoulder, her waist; every second bringing her closer while he kissed her with a desire that wasn’t desperate but consuming and serious, tasting her, his tongue in her mouth, stroking hers, making her gasp and then moan, the sound so charged, so undone he held her even more tightly and the hand at her waist moved up to cup her breast through her kefta. She shifted, arched into him, sucking on his lower lip, her fingers at the nape of his neck, wanting him to feel not only her light but her urgency, her recognition, how she cherished him. She was dizzy with his scent, his touch, the feel of his body pressed against hers and if he’d asked to raise her skirts and take her, she would have cried out her assent to ring through the trees.

He drew back, panting, looking at her half-dazed, his hands still on her. And gave her something like a wry smile, except that his joy overwhelmed everything else.

“It matters,” he repeated. “I, we have to stop, I won’t tumble you here, *milaya*.”

“Here?” Alina said.

“I’d sooner return to the cottage,” he said. “And I wouldn’t tumble you, I want to make love to you in my bed. To fall asleep with you in my arms.”

They were both silent then, caught in the same reverie, the image he’d invoked more easily than darkness, of them lying naked in his bed, the white linens rumpled, the scent of their coupling heady, Alina’s loosened hair like black silk; the softening sound of their breath as they dozed, to dream again of what they’d just had and would wake to. Alina saw her hand laid against Aleksander’s chest where his heart beat and wondered whether she would be

wearing anything on it—a ring, the silk bracelet studded with blood knots, a gold tattoo as they had once used in Tsibeya...

“As your wife?” Alina said.

“As my Beloved,” he answered, saying it so she knew it was not merely an endearment but a title, one that perhaps was the culmination of the old vow he’d recited. “As my wife if you will.”

“That is still not a question, Sasha,” she said. She saw how part of him wanted to kiss her again until she forgot to ask any questions, make any argument, to say only *Sasha* and *yes* and *more*; she saw in his face how he put that aside and how similar it was to when he conjured for the Cut.

“Would you be my wife? My Beloved?” he asked, his voice unsure, hopeful, ardent. Longing.

“Soon,” she said. “When I’m your equal.”

“You are that already, Alya,” he said and though she could hardly believe it, she heard how he meant to coax her, just as any boy might try to wheedle a kiss from a girl. “I see you so. I know you to be so. In my heart, in my shadows, I feel it.”

“In my own eyes, then,” she said. “What is between us, what we are to each other, that’s not all we need to talk about today—”

“I’ll wait as long as you like. As long as you need,” he said, touching her cheek gently. “But for myself, I am bound to you, and nothing will change that.”

“Because of merzost?” she asked. Had he done something irrevocable to himself without counting the cost?

“No, though I see the Librarian has your education well in hand,” he replied. “Because I’m in love with you, *moya dusha*.” And then he pulled her close again and bent his head to kiss her, his mouth hot and sweet and generous, undemanding and unstinting, whispering *Alya my Beloved* against her lips when he paused, touching his forehead to hers. He led her over to the stone bench and they sat but he would not let go of her hand and held it in the one that wore the silver ring.

“As difficult as it is to resist you, I know we must speak of other matters,” he said. “Of the Little Palace, the Tsar—”

“Why don’t you want me to meet Dame Baghra?” Alina asked. “You’ve said a little about why you didn’t want her to teach me, but it’s more than that.”

“Who has spoken of Dame Baghra to you?” he said.

“Healer Balakina. Ivan, and he hardly says anything at all,” she replied. “He said however soon I met her would be soon enough.” Aleksander laughed, a short, bitter noise, and she raised an eyebrow.

“You know, when you get to know him, he’s actually quite funny,” Aleksander said and shrugged. “Dame Baghra does not inspire warm feelings in the Grisha.”

“Because she hits them?”

“Master Botkin hits the Grisha when he trains them in combat and he is revered and honored,” Aleksander said. “Dame Baghra uses humiliation as readily as her ferrule. She has little true affection for any other Grisha and barely any more respect.”

“She chooses to live at the Little Palace though,” Alina said.

“She lives *near* the Little Palace,” he said. “She has a suite at the Little Palace that the maids dust every day, that she has never stepped foot in since she was first shown it.”

“Why does she stay? Why don’t you ask her to leave?” Alina said.

“Because she is the only other Shadow Summoner I have ever met,” he said. “Because she was old when I was young and she knows things I must. Because—”

“There’s more than that?” Alina interrupted.

“She is my mother,” he said.

“Your *mother*—”

“And today she came to me, told me to protect what I held most dear. Not to get soft. To trust too widely. She told me not to allow myself to be taken in by the music of the snake-charmer, for that is when the cobra strikes,” he explained.

“I’m a cobra now?” Alina said, momentarily distracted from the revelation about his parentage.

“No, she didn’t mean that. Your death is the one she fears, Alya,” he said. He didn’t say why. She decided to ask the simpler question first.

“Who is trying to kill me at the Little Palace?” she said.

“I don’t know. And that troubles me,” he said.

Alina thought of the Grisha she’d met, Genya whom she’d trusted right away and kindly Fedyor who’d saved her life, David, Marie and Nadia and Sergei, a score of others she knew even less, hardly enough to make them want to kill her, Liucija and Togtuun, both wise in ways Alina knew she herself was not, who had not seemed to bear her any ill-will. And Ivan, who stood like a carved pillar outside her door, who’d already learned to hold the four chambers of her heart in his hand.

“It can’t be Ivan, at least. He’s already tried to kill me once and now he’s taken an oath to keep me alive. There’s that,” she said.

“There is indeed that,” he said. “And Baghra may be wrong in her perception. It may not be your death someone seeks, but your power. Your influence. To turn you against me and keep our Summoning from changing Ravka.”

“Is she often wrong, your mother?” Alina said, returning to what he’d said and then passed over as if it were not also a critical piece of information.

“More than she’d admit to,” he said. “Which has made her bitter. Hard. But that has served her well, her bitterness.”

“Has it served you well, Sasha?” she said. The way he spoke of her, the way he had become tense when Ivan announced her presence, bracing himself for some attack. Some injury that he might not recover from. For all she knew of him, for all he’d said before, the revelation that Baghra was his mother had made her see him with a different perspective; he’d been a child once, small and curious, and before that a baby with big dark eyes, swaddled and nursed, rocked in a cradle. Sung to. Baghra must have sung him a lullaby at least once, mustn’t she?

“I am the only one of her children who survived. Who grew up,” he said. “For ones like us, that seemed a miracle. To want more—perhaps I am as greedy as she says.”

“No,” Alina said.

“No?”

“I haven’t been at the Little Palace long, but I’ve seen how the younglings are treated. How the people taking care of them take actual care, praise them and comfort them. Give them a hug before they call a Healer for a skinned knee or elbow. Call them pet names. I’ve heard how the General visits, how he sits on the floor to hear the Librarian’s stories, how he always has comfits and citron humbugs in his pocket,” Alina said. “You don’t think those children are greedy. And neither were you. Neither are you. At least not when it comes to your own mother.”

“I’m not like them,” he said. She gave a quick squeeze to his hand.

“No, you’re right. You’re her son. Not her student or her ward. But I wonder--she came to you. She insisted on meeting alone with you,” Alina said. “She warned you, about losing something you care about. It’s not very much but maybe it’s something? I don’t know, I’m not an expert on mothers.”

“But you are quite adept at caring for people. As I know from experience,” he said.

“Oh, well, that’s just, I think of what Ana Kuya did and do the opposite,” she said.

“I should have told you before, he’s better, your friend Mal,” Aleksander said. “I heard back from his commanding officer. He recovered from his injuries quite well, is an asset to his unit. I made it clear he could write to you here, if he wants to.”

“Mal’s all right,” Alina said. The events of the crossing were still hazy for her, though it was light that flooded and obscured her memory, not the dark of the Fold. She remembered Mal’s eyes then and afterwards, how he couldn’t keep pain from making him grimace when she’d last seen him. “You’re sure?”

“No First Army officer would dare to lie to General Kirigan,” Aleksander said and then smiled. “And why would they risk my...disapprobation over something that appears so minor to them? I’m sure, Alya.”

“I should’ve asked sooner,” she said. “It’s been weeks that we’ve been here and I didn’t—what kind of a friend does that make me?”

“I would not have had anything to tell you yet. The response only arrived yesterday,” Aleksander said. “And I think it doesn’t make you any different a friend than you have been, only one trying to find her own way, as Mal must be doing, though his path is far more clear.”

“I suppose,” Alina replied in a tone that said she did anything but. This time, Aleksander squeezed her hand but also used it to pull her closer.

“Come here, *milaya*.” She let herself nestle against him and felt his arm go around her back, resting on her hip. “You’re such a little thing, I forget sometimes. I’ve missed you.”

“You’ve seen me every day,” she said.

“Not enough. I would not have thought I’d be saying this, but I was spoiled in the cottage,” he said.

“Spoiled?”

“We were not hidden from each other,” he said. “You were there and every word you spoke was like a petal of a rose, revealing the whole, lush blossom.”

“You’re forgetting plenty of thorns,” she said and then he took his other hand to angle her face towards his.

“No, I’m not, Alya. You’ve never hurt me,” he said. “I want you, whatever else I may have to bear to have you.”

“I’m here right now,” she said.

“So you are,” he said and then lowered his lips to hers. Before, she had been inviting him and then he had been accepting, confirming; this was an altogether different caress, Aleksander luxuriating in her, allowing her to discover what he liked best—the way she licked his lower lip and then sucked on it, her fingers finding the delicate skin behind his ear and the silkiness of the hair at the nape of his neck, how her light rose within her when his tongue rutted into her mouth and when he tightened his hold at her waist. He tasted like nothing else, an exquisite savor she’d never known and now found she could not get enough of. It was a kiss with no limits, no constraints, even as the sun began to fall from the sky and the shadows that collected were not ones he’d cast.

“It’s getting late,” she managed to say as he nuzzled her throat, the rasp of his beard against her pulse terribly, wonderfully erotic, his affirmation hummed into her skin, making her shiver.

“You’re getting cold,” he said, leaning back.

“No, it’s not that. We’ll be missed and I don’t want Ivan coming after us again,” she said, to make him laugh.

“He won’t but your point is taken. It’s only—I had wished to have some greater resolution before we returned, however mad that might be, but tonight we’ll be apart again,” he said.

“It wouldn’t be...seemly for me to spend the nights in your quarters if we’re not married. People would talk, even if you swore them to secrecy,” Alina said. “But you should know I’ll want to be with you—”

“Perhaps, maybe there is a way,” he said. “Alina, in your studies, have you read about the concept of the tether?”

“But that’s just theoretical, isn’t it? Or metaphysical—I wasn’t able to do a great cross-reference and the Librarian is looking for a text that might be helpful or might just be a bunch of fairy tales that were mistranslated by a monk who believed that starvation led to clarity but then he allegedly drank half the ink,” Alina said.

“It is possible,” he said. “And that’s what counts. It would allow you to call to me, to call upon me for whatever you needed, wherever you are.”

“It’s one-way?” she asked. “Because I’m hearing about how I can rely on you but what about if you need something?”

“I don’t want to ever be a burden to you, Alina, and though we haven’t spoken of it much, I am your elder by many years. Simply to know that I could be with you if you wanted it would be enough for me,” he said.

“I don’t want it,” she said, watching his face, which had been so open and eager, grow remote. “Sashenka, I don’t want it if it doesn’t allow us both access. Equally. I know I’m young and little and far more like an *otkazat’sya* than a Grisha most of the time, but I don’t want to be your child or your pet. And anyway, you’re not even sure it would work or how —”

“It would not be *merzost*, if that’s what you’re worried about,” he said. “And we already have something like it, I think—when I touch you, yes, your power is amplified, but it’s more than that. When I was so sick, you did something with your light and when you called me back, when I called you back after Ivan—I think that is what a tether is. Or begins as.”

“I think tether is a poor choice of words then,” she said. “It’s like a loop. Or a stitch, we’re knitted together. We only have to figure out how to feel it, how the breath that I let go becomes the one that you take.”

“Then the distance between us may prove a blessing. An opportunity to learn, to practice,” he said. “A compensation for the nights I have to spend without you.”

“Until you don’t have to,” she said. “Until we’re ready—”

“Until it’s safe for you to wed me. Until everyone knows you as the Sun Summoner or Sankta Alina, not the General’s bride, Lady Kirigana.”

“It’s too late to argue with you anymore,” she said. “But for myself, I won’t mind becoming Alina Starkov Kirigana as long as it means I am Alya too.”

“You make me wish I had only brought Opasnost, that we might ride back together,” he said.

“I’ll never become a good horsewoman that way though and you know it,” she said.

“I can know it and still want you in my arms as the stars embroider the night’s kefta,” he replied. It was true— behind him, the sky had darkened enough the first stars, the Diadem and Krodo’s Double-axe, had become visible, though she mostly saw the gleam in Aleksander’s eyes.

“It’s not fair to quote poetry at me and expect me to not get all swoony,” she said.

“I’m not quoting anyone,” he said. So she brought his hand to her lips and kissed the center of his palm, her eyes holding his all the while.



## Chapter 19

They returned so late that the dinner Genya had ordered had grown cold, the noodles in their rich gravy congealed into a lumpy mass the red-haired woman wrinkled her nose at; the temperature and texture were not enough to put off Alina though she knew her appetite was for something far more delicious than the Head Chef's best work.

"I'd get you something else, but it will destroy the ruse," Genya said. "That is, that you've been in here for the past five, no, six hours with me dabbing your head with cologne scented handkerchiefs. You're even more lucky Healer Balakina is away for the week and no one likes Healer Jurgis very much because his bedside manner is remarkably like a lamprey."

"It's all right," Alina said, noting the hint of frustration in Genya's tone, especially as she'd said, *five, no, six* but kept herself from adding *young lady* as Ana Kuya would certainly have done. Alina offered an apologetic smile. "It's hardly the worst meal I've ever had and there's plenty of it."

"Are you able to tell me anything?" Genya asked, choosing her words with the same precision she brought to her Tailoring. Alina felt the impulse to confide in her, that temptation to trust so compelling, and she forced herself to consider what was at risk, or rather who—Aleksander with his dark eyes troubled by the alleged compromise of the Little Palace, his dark eyes alight with his affection and frank lust for her, Aleksander who'd already been willing to die for her, who'd killed for her, who'd wept in his sleep when he dreamt she'd been murdered.

"The Little Palace is like Keramzin in all sorts of odd ways. But it still takes me by surprise more often than not," she said, telling the truth and telling Genya nothing she couldn't have surmised.

"I can see how it would and perhaps you'll think me overstepping but Alina, please, be careful," Genya said.

"Careful of what?"

"Powerful men," Genya said. "When they have power and when they lose it. And be careful of yourself. Of when you bend and when you don't. Can't."

"I wish—" Alina said, breaking off. She couldn't say *I wish you were my friend*. If Mal were here, she could trust him, but he wouldn't know what Genya did about being a woman, a Grisha, someone who had to live in two worlds.

"I hope you're wishing for dessert, because I made sure they gave you some. Rogaliki, with kassia and sultanas. They're no worse for waiting," Genya said. "And Alina, I understand. Secrets and their safe-keeping. Better than most. I hope you sleep well."

Left alone, the pretty blue and white Vezda suite was something between a refuge and a prison, Alina found herself thinking, though she'd little experience of either. She nibbled at

the spiced pastries, because it had been thoughtful of Genya and because it was something to occupy her. She felt at loose ends, jumpy and tired, wanting to be alone with Aleksander, a bed with fresh linens within a few short steps. Wanting to be alone with her own thoughts. She wished she had whatever books the Library held that might better explain what he'd called the tether and she wished even more that she hadn't left behind all her sketches, though she trusted Togtuun's discretion, even if she wasn't supposed to entirely trust Togtuun. She walked around the rooms, unable to settle down, and finally just gave herself over to fretting.

For all that she'd worried about coming to the Little Palace, the situation she found herself in wasn't one she'd imagined. Or one that Aleksander had thought to warn her about. She didn't even know exactly what Dame Baghra had told him or how serious the danger was, but Aleksander had been shaken by the conversation he'd had and that had to mean something. She admitted to herself that all she really wanted to do was go to his quarters and beg him to run away with her, to some place so far and so removed, there would be no threat, not now, not ever. But that was something she'd known to be impossible since they'd been in the cottage in the woods; even on the brink of death, he'd only thought to protect her by bringing her back to Os Alta. There was no retreat they could make and none he would be willing to, his life's work saving and nurturing the Grisha not one he would give up, even for her.

Even for her, when he'd told her she meant everything to him and then made her understand what everything was to a man who was the General and the Darkling and Aleksander, only son of Baghra. And Sasha, who wanted a wife and a home and a family of his own, but not enough to run away and leave his people to the unreliable and paltry mercy of the Tsar, and she couldn't fault that in him any more than she could disapprove of his broad shoulders or feline grace. They'd have to stay and discover how great the purported threat was while Alina tried to grasp and master the binding between them. Aleksander had been able to teach her about casting sfera, about gathering her light and then dispersing it like fog, like flower petals, like a wave cresting on the shore or a cup overflowing. But he didn't know anything more than she did when it came to the way they could use their power as a conduit. She imagined it that way for just a minute, imagined her light, her essence poured like precious oil from a cask through a funnel to be received by him and felt a faint but undeniable response, a sudden thrill of joy and pride and relief that she recognized as Aleksander, as readily as she recognized his voice among others a crowd or the taste of his lips. It gave her enough peace to be able to get ready for bed and to sleep, if not quite as well as Genya had bid her.

In the morning, she turned to the only person she could for some unimpeachable advice. She didn't bother with a preamble or pleasantries, knowing what he thought of them.

"Ivan, do you trust Fedyor?"

"With my life, Miss Starkov," he said. "And with yours."

"How did you know you could? Trust him, I mean," Alina asked.

Ivan gave her a long look but he didn't narrow his eyes or simply shrug. He wasn't exactly easy to make a study of, missing basically nothing that went on around him, but she had

better-than-average observational skills and ample motivation to understand him so while she wouldn't have counted on beating him at cards, she had a decent grasp of what his current expression meant, though it didn't give her an idea of what he'd answer.

"The other Grisha think Fedyor wears his heart on his sleeve, but they are deceived by his amiable nature. Amiability means nothing to me, so I learned to see the rest of him. How quick he was to strike when he feared the worst and how hard. How long he would spar in Master Botkin's classes. He never lies if he can help it, but when he does, no one would believe it to be anything but the truth unless they bothered to look only in his eyes. I fought beside him before we were friends and we were friends before we were lovers and if he must be my brother-soldier instead of my husband, he will do it without complaint," Ivan said. "That will only help you in regards to Fedya, not the others."

"The others?"

"You are asking because you are afraid," he said, nodding. "That is good. You'd be the stupid girl some of them think you are if you assumed you were safe because this is the Little Palace and the General favors you. You aren't afraid of me, because I've already done the worst I can to you. And now you wish to trust Fedyor, because I do, but my choices must have explanations. I will do what I can to keep you safe from any danger here, but I can't tell you who to believe to be your ally or your friend. Except you should know that General Kirigan looks at you as I have never seen him look at anyone. It is clear your life means more to him than any other, including his own."

"That's...a lot. To take in," she said. Ivan was as direct and efficient in his speech as he was in Heartrending and his words left her with the echo of the faintness of his prior attack, though this time, he had tried only to help her as she'd asked him to.

"Fedyor would be better at this part," he replied.

"No, this was what I wanted," she said.

"As a small child, you perceived the Grisha examiners as a threat. Unlike any other child in Ravka, you were able to hide. To keep yourself safe," Ivan offered. "That ability is still within you, except now you know you are the Sun Summoner. The Little Palace is simply a place filled with people. You'll find out who yours are."

"I guess so," she said.

"You will. Otherwise, you won't live and neither will any of the rest of us if the General loses you," Ivan said matter-of-factly.

"You think he would kill his Grisha if I died?" Alina asked.

"No, I think he would annihilate Ravka. Shu-Han. Fjerda. I think the Fold would look like Sankta Maradi's festival day and the Volcra like the Tsaritsa's pet canaries," Ivan said. "The Grisha would be collateral damage."

"You're right," Alina said and Ivan nodded. "Fedyor *would* be better at this part."

Ivan smiled then and he didn't resemble any monster, any beast or ravening spirit; he only looked like a man who was amused and possibly even fond of her.

"Shall I send him to you?"

"No, I have other plans for the day. Thank you, Ivan," she said.

She did not need to send a message to Togtuun asking that her drawings of Aleksander be hidden within the Library's depths; a note arrived that read *The shelf of Ravka tithing records, Tsar of Countess X's court—only let him see when you are alone*, unsigned except for the Library's stamp, a small, elaborate design like a miniature labyrinth with something that shimmered at its center. She had Genya dress her and arrange her hair in the style most commonly preferred by Grisha women in combat, told her to forgo any Tailoring, and asked to have a flask of vinegar, an unleavened loaf of black bread, and a handful of buckthorn berries in a rush basket sent from the kitchens. Genya's eyes widened but she only nodded and rested her hand on Alina's shoulder after she finished with her hair, a gesture of comradeship and encouragement. And warning.

"The full samovar service I think for today's Shatranj match with the General, Genya," Alina instructed, once the basket had arrived and had been tucked in the crook of her arm. "With extra honey cakes."

Genya nodded again and squeezed Alina's hand in parting.

Alina followed the ritual in every detail, starting with her right foot and resisting the temptation to cast even the smallest sfera within her palm. She arrived, knocked once, and waited for the door to open. She held the basket in both hands and gazed ahead without flinching.

"Dame Baghra, I greet you with the bounty and the balm, that bitterness may pass from your house and never return. I claim the guest-right of your roof and the wisdom of your age, the blessing of bread broken—"

"Yes, I know, I know. You're letting all the heat out. Come in then, girl," Baghra answered. "He won't like it."

"No, he won't," Alina said and crossed the threshold.

## Chapter 20

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“You did what?” Aleksander said, his voice very low and very tight, a dramatic change from the affectionate way he’d welcomed her into his quarters once the door had closed behind her; she could still feel the wood carving matching his kefta’s embroidery on her lower back as though she’d worn nothing but her linen shift, she could still taste his lips, still hear way he’d moaned into her mouth when she’d clutched at the nape of his neck. Alina took a sip of tea and moved a piece on the board, then lifted her eyes to his and held his gaze as she answered.

“I told you, I paid a call to Dame Baghra. I followed the old ways, so she had to let me in.”

“I cannot believe you went to her—”

“Why? You didn’t tell me I shouldn’t and you didn’t give me any particular reason to think that I shouldn’t and you told me you don’t command me. And that she’s your mother,” Alina said. “I thought she wouldn’t expect me to turn up on her threshold, holding Pyanitsa’s basket, and she didn’t. You’re both so much older than I am, all I have is the element of surprise—”

“That’s not all you have and you well know it, Alina,” Aleksander said, moving his queen.

“Is that a compliment? It’s hard to tell, especially since you’re still glowering at me,” she replied.

“It’s a reminder that you must not underestimate yourself,” he said. “I suppose I should apologize for my expression, but I’ve never been described as glowering before.”

“Who would dare? Only Ivan, probably, and he would hardly notice—that’s his regular look, except when Fedyor is near,” Alina said. She moved another piece on the board before she spoke again. “You are...dismayed that I visited Dame Baghra. I can’t help wondering why exactly, though it was very nearly the first remark she made to me, that you wouldn’t like it. Not one bit.”

“That’s probably why she let you in,” he said. “Pyanitsa’s basket notwithstanding and I must admit, that was a gambit worthy of an experienced diplomat, Alina.”

“You aren’t answering my question,” she said. “And you’re not giving me a very good game of shatranj, nor are you even eating the honey-cakes I ordered expressly for you—”

“I’m sorry. I don’t trust Baghra to keep you safe. I don’t trust her not to hurt you herself, if she believes, for whatever benighted reason, that would be in her own interest,” he said.

“You’re not telling me everything,” Alina said. Alexander studied the board, moved a castle. She shifted her queen. “Check.”

“I don’t know what she will tell you about me. My past. My choices,” he said. Admitted.

“Sashenka, you have to know that whatever she said to me, whatever she may say to me, I wouldn’t take it as the Saints-sanctioned truth. Her word wouldn’t be a sentence,” she replied.

“Are you saying that because you care about me?” he asked, notably choosing the word *care* and not *love*, for all that she’d tried to make it clear how she felt.

“No, because I’m a skeptic by my nature,” she said. “Though I do love you and that means I’ll listen to you, I’ll ask you questions if she makes me worry—”

“What did she say?”

“Well, first she offered me a cup of tea, which I refused, because I wasn’t about to drink whatever she gave me and risk getting drugged and also, it was swelteringly hot—I thought I would sweat through my kefta,” she said and he smiled, as she’d hoped he would. Baghra’s hut, there was no other name for it, had been like an anchoret’s cell, except for the brutal heat and the stacks of books flanking the hearth, but there was nothing that suggested any faith in Saints or the Apparatus dicta in Baghra’s words or tone.

“She’s always cold, because she uses her power so rarely. The shadows become icy when they are restrained for too long,” he explained. “You likely had a fever for much of your childhood because your light was suppressed.”

“Oh, that’s quite interesting. It’s strange that she chooses not to Summon but teaches most of the other Grisha how to use their power.”

“She’s not a woman easily persuaded,” Aleksander said. “The Healers have stopped telling her that her health is being affected by her refusal and they believe that the teaching offers her a sort of spill-over which is helping to keep her alive.”

“No, I can see that. She seemed to be someone used to making declarations,” Alina said.

“Now you are the one who is not telling me everything, Alina,” he said.

“She said there was a reason we had been kept apart so long, the dark and the light, that either would overwhelm the other as easily as a breath is taken,” Alina replied. “I told her that her use of epigrams wasn’t getting us anywhere, though I appreciated that it might have been the preferred style for formal dialogue back when she was a girl. And also, that I’d nursed enough sick orphans through croup in Keramzin to know a breath isn’t always taken without the least effort. She was rather put out.”

“I imagine she was,” Aleksander said. He was pleased with her, reached over and took a honey-cake for himself.

“I couldn’t tell if she was warning me against you or warning me that she’d defend you against me. Or whether she saw some other larger threat, she went on and on about a cuckoo and a viper and a blighted dragon—I thought the dragon was probably a dig at me for being Shu, but then she talked about who would love a saint weeping tears of blood and Sasha, isn’t there some way to trick her into Summoning? Because she seemed like she was crumbling, around the edges now, but for how long?”

“She’s lived a long life. She has strengths you and I can only guess at,” he said. “I’ve never met anyone who would think to try and trick her—”

“You’ve only known me for a few weeks, though,” Alina said.

“I’d call you a minx for that, *milaya*, except it’s the truth,” he said.

“She said something else. She said I should look to what became of all the women who shared your bed,” Alina said. “I told her you should do the same for the men who shared mine—”

“You truly said that?” he exclaimed, nearly dropping the honey-cake he held.

“She couldn’t know I’ve only shared a bed with Mal, when we were little. I might be the whore of Babilim for all she knows,” Alina said.

“I haven’t told you everything, not about Luda. Not about the others,” he said.

“You told me you loved Luda and her death came close to destroying you. If you haven’t spoken of the others, they can’t have been as important, though I wouldn’t have you think that I’m worldly or not given to jealousy, because I’m neither,” Alina said. “I don’t see how your mother would know more of what’s been in your heart than you do, not as you’ve told me she’s treated you. Not based on what she said today and what I know from the time we’ve spent together.”

“There has been no one else since I met you,” he said, reaching over to take her hand in his, his so much larger her own was held easily, entirely within his grasp. “There will not be anyone else for me, whether I live forever or pass from this earth as any man does.”

“Good,” Alina said. “But she made me think, when she said it. About the women you keep close, what happens to them and this is what’s troubling me the most—what about Genya, Sasha?”

“Genya has never been my bedmate—”

“I know that,” Alina said. “I know she’s served the Tsaritsa since she was a little girl, that you sent her there, to the Grand Palace. That’s why she wears a cream-colored kefta, like the Tsaritsa’s servants.”

“Her ability as a Tailor sets her apart. It was a tactical decision, one I could not refrain from making, no matter how I felt about it,” he replied.

“You sent her to serve the Tsaritsa. To spy on the Tsaritsa. Did you mean for the Tsar to be permitted to assault her?” Alina asked. If she was to be the Sun Summoner, Sankta Alina of the Fold, she must be willing to speak to the most powerful Grisha in Ravka, in the known world, and make him answer her. She saw a light in his dark eyes as he understood. As he understood, he let go of her hand but with a deliberate care.

“I did not want that for her. I did not accept that—I did not think the Tsaritsa would stand for it, that she would dismiss Genya before anything serious could happen,” he said.

“But she came to you. She told you—”

“No, she didn’t, Alina,” Aleksander said. Was he trying to claim he hadn’t known? That ignorance was his excuse. “Fedyor did. He came to me, he told me.”

“When?”

“As soon as he knew,” Aleksander said.

“Why have you let it go on?” Alina asked. She thought he might close his eyes, turn his face away, but he did neither, looking back at her steadily.

“My Grisha do not lie to me,” he said. “She told me it had stopped when I asked her. The Grisha of the Second Army risk their lives in battle, in crossing the Fold. Grisha risk their lives in espionage, in Ravka and abroad. However fond I was of Genya, I could not treat her differently—”

“She couldn’t tell you the truth,” Alina said. “General Kirigan.”

There was a long pause, a silence they’d never had between them before, one of judgment and grief, regret and frustration. Alina prepared herself for Aleksander’s challenge, his defense of his actions, his accusation about her own lack of experience as a military commander, as the leader of a persecuted people. His mother had said he never apologized, as the night did not apologize for overtaking the day, and Alina had thought he came by his tendency for a certain dramatic turn of speech honestly, but she didn’t see how else he would answer her.

“I know. I knew,” he said and she heard the burden of it, the suffering of those he wanted to protect and failed to protect. She remembered the look in Genya’s eyes and the gentleness of her hands as she worked and how still she could be when they sat together. How that cream-colored kefta was the same color as a shroud.

“It ends now. You Summon shadows and they hide terrible things. I Summon light and light reveals terrible things. I don’t care what you have to tell the Tsaritsa, Genya must only serve at the Little Palace. Let her Tailor a battalion of spies or work in the Fabrikator studios. She has done enough at the Imperial court,” Alina said. “It ends now. Today.”

“If that is what you want—”



“That’s what we want, isn’t it, Aleksander? For the Grisha to be safe? That means they must be safe now. That sacrifices have to be made with the greatest care. For the greatest benefit. What is happening now isn’t tactical, it’s not a sacrifice. It’s torture,” Alina said.

“You have to know I hated it, Alina,” he said.

“Not as much as Genya,” she said. He let go of her hand and then got out of his chair and walked the few steps to stand before her. She thought he would stretch out his hand to invite her to stand, the game, the conversation ended, but instead, he dropped to his knee and bent his head, the ancient posture of the supplicant.

“You have spoken, Summoner, and I have heard,” he said, his voice low and clear, resonant as a struck bell. He lifted his face and held her gaze, his dark eyes very beautiful and full of tears. “Beloved, when you call, I will answer, at the sound of your voice, I would cross every sea, no matter how wide, no matter what lay beneath the waters.”

“Get up, Sasha,” Alina said. “I don’t deserve this, I don’t need it—”

“Do you want to tell her?” he said, sounding like the man who’d spoken to her in the depth of the night. He still knelt before her, but he rested his hand just above her knee, very lightly, a claim and a caress, a question. She stroked a finger across his knuckles and then traced his fingertips with her own, an answer, an entreaty of her own. He moved his hand up her thigh, enough for them both to notice, then turned it over and laced his fingers through hers.

“No,” she said. “You are her General. Her commanding officer. I’d like to be her friend, to be able to trust her.”

“You did this,” Genya said the following morning, after she’d dismissed the rest of the maids and they were alone in Alina’s bedchamber, Genya brushing her hand very carefully across the front panel of her scarlet kefta. “He, the General said it was your doing. You insisted, he said—”

“I don’t want you to think he was arguing for you to remain in the Grand Palace,” Alina replied. “I didn’t have to push very hard—”

“He wouldn’t have done it without you,” Genya said.

“That’s true,” Alina said, feeling how the words were right, the resonance of a struck bell at the heart of her. “He couldn’t. He’s been, I don’t know, it’s like he’s been fighting with one hand tied behind his back, dark without light, how do you make that work?”

“If I may be candid, Sun Summoner,” Genya said, inclining her head slightly, “I don’t know and I don’t know if I care. Not when I think I don’t have to go back. That I don’t have to let him touch me, do whatever he wants—you’ve freed me, I’m in your debt—”

“No, you’re not,” Alina interrupted. “Not at all, this isn’t about debts or owing or being bound, Saints, I don’t want that. I just wanted you to be safe, Genya. Not because I’m the Sun

Summoner or Sankta Alina, but because you deserve to be safe. To choose the risks you take.”

“I was trying to warn you, but you only heard how I was in danger, not yourself,” Genya said.

“Oh, I’ve heard plenty about how I’m in danger. The multiple assassination attempts, by Fjerdans and Grisha, haven’t exactly been lost upon me,” Alina said. “Aleksan—General Kirigan worries enough for both of us—”

“Do you know what he looks like when he says your name? When he talks about you?” Genya asked.

“I, he, well, it’s complicated,” Alina began.

“He looks like a man. A man most desperately, most devotedly in love,” Genya said. “Not like the Lord of the Grisha, the General of the Second Army. Definitely not like the Darkling the otkazat’sya fear.”

“Would everyone see what you do?” Alina asked, a question Genya was clearly not expecting but found interesting.

“No, I don’t think they would,” she said finally. “I don’t think they would look and I think he would try harder to keep them from perceiving it. I think he let me, that it was part of the restitution he said he owed me.”

“Will you tell anyone?”

“I won’t betray you. I’d only speak of it if you asked me to,” Genya said. “You might, someday. The unimaginable happens more than we’d ever admit.”

“That doesn’t sound like you, that last part,” Alina said.

“David said it. He says it all the time,” Genya replied.

“Because it makes him feel better?” Alina asked.

“No, he says it when he’s worried,” Genya answered.

## Chapter End Notes

Saint Paraskevi of Iconium (also known as Paraskeva Pyatnitsa) is venerated as a Christian virgin martyr. Paraskeva-Pyatnitsa "developed a personality and functions of her own on Russian soil." Icons of the 13th-15th centuries from Novgorod depict Paraskeva as an ascetic figure wearing the red of martyrdom. She holds an Eastern cross, a scroll professing her faith, or a vessel that holds the perfume of martyrdom. She was depicted with St. Anastasia or Saint Barbara or St. Juliana; sometimes she is

depicted with male saints. In Russia, Paraskeva-Pyatnitsa was the patroness of traders and fairs, and of marriage.

# Chapter 21

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

*“...no matter what you say, Alina, I’m worried about you, but I guess I’ll just say what old Ana Kuya always did and hope her advice was better than her borscht ever was—remember where you’re from and you’ll never go too far astray. Never thought I’d need to put that in a letter to you, but then I never thought a lot of things...”*

“Who do you think you are?” the beautiful dark-haired Squaller called Zoya said, her tone making it unclear whether she meant the question rhetorically. She made a slight gesture with her hand and there was a gust of air, sharp and cold and bitter, at Alina’s throat. “Who does she think she is?” Zoya asked, repeating herself for the small group that was listening, most avidly, in the sunny courtyard Alina had just a moment ago found pleasant and relaxing, letting her guard down as the conversation turned to discussion of all the quirks of the Little Palace, well beyond General Kirigan’s insistence on pickled herring or the mysteries of what Baghra brewed in her oppressively stuffy hovel.

“I’m a Grisha, just like you,” Alina said. She’d come early to the sparring rooms, full of a nervous energy that even casting sfera hadn’t helped and Togtuun had very politely and with an amused expression kicked her out of the Library, suggesting other avenues of education be pursued. She’d trained alone for an hour and then Master Botkin had worked with her, laconic but surprisingly helpful for all that his remarks were few; he had a sense of the body’s urge to strike that she recognized without possessing more than a thimble-full.

“You’re nothing like me,” Zoya replied, looking at her much as Alina would have regarded a wriggling weevil in a wholemeal loaf. “And you’re nothing like the rest of the Grisha.”

“To be Grisha is to be exceptional,” Alina said.

“You can tell yourself that all you want,” Zoya said.

“I didn’t say that. I’m quoting Morta Mindaugus. Perhaps you haven’t read her work in the Library. It is taxing but there’s a lot to mull over, it’s an especially rich text if you really devote yourself to it,” Alina replied.

“You can hide in the Library all you like and quote whoever the kurva you think will impress everyone, but you’ll never really be one of us,” Zoya said.

“What’s this truly about, Zoya? Because if I’m real enough for General Kirigan to accept, then what else do you want?” Alina asked, seeing the very slight alteration in Zoya’s expression when she mentioned Aleksander. *What happened to the women who shared his bed*, Baghra’s words echoed in Alina’s mind and she remembered how Zoya had identified her on the skiff, how closely she had stood to Aleksander when he was only the Darkling and Alina was a fearful otkazat’sya, dirty and small and drab until Aleksander cut her open and her light filled his tent.

“I don’t want anything from you,” Zoya said. “I already took what I wanted, that First Army soldier you were following around—I had him on his knees within five minutes—”

“You attacked Mal?”

“Oh no, what an innocent you are! He went down very willingly,” Zoya said, laughing, reveling in her conquest as if Alina were still breaking her heart over Mal. Alina before the Fold would have been hurt, more by Mal’s constant appetite for women than this particular assignation, but so much had happened since then, the only person she felt sorry for was her earlier self, her light all locked up, weak and scrawny and desperate. Zoya was intent on riling her up or humiliating her or both and Alina couldn’t see to what end; she turned, began to walk away and felt a gust of air knock into her back like a great, brutal fist.

“You weren’t dismissed,” Zoya said, which drew a shocked sound from the few people watching the exchange. The air pummeled Alina again and the breath within her lungs trembled. She forced herself to approach Zoya, raised her hand to strike as Master Botkin trained her but Zoya moved again, using her own hands instead of altering the air into weapons, hitting Alina in the ribs, the jaw, and then sending the wind to cudgel her until someone else cried out,

“Stop! She’s down, she’s hurt! Someone call a Healer—now!”

“No,” she said, working to say the word, the way she’d first worked to cast *sfera* when Aleksander instructed her. She didn’t want him to learn about this from anyone but her, or maybe Ivan, didn’t want him to hear how she’d collapsed, how Zoya had attacked her, how the other Grisha, Marie and Nadia, Misha and Vladimir, had all watched it happen, stepping in only when it wasn’t clear how badly Zoya had injured her. For all Baghra’s ominous warnings, Alina was sure the old woman hadn’t meant something this simple, Zoya’s utter inability to accept she’d been rendered irrelevant to Aleksander, when she had thought she would always be special to him; Alina wouldn’t make Zoya be her enemy, because it was all the other woman hoped for now and it was a burden she could keep from Aleksander. “No, I’m all right, I’ll be all right—”

“Starkov, I will take you back to your rooms,” Master Botkin said, appearing as if from the aether, that substance Ilya Morozova always ignored in his disquisitions on *merzost*. Alina managed to scrabble into a sitting position and was halfway to her knees when she felt Master Botkin’s hand at her elbow, raising her up and then bearing nearly all her weight in a way none would appreciate. “Nazyalensky, go to the training rooms and wait for my return.”

“Yes, Master Botkin,” Zoya said smartly, unchastened.

“And think of what you will say,” he said. He had a way of being so very still, his choice to speak was like a visitation from another world.

“What I’ll say?”

“To General Kirigan,” Master Botkin said. “You will want to choose your words with great care, I think. Very great care. He does not believe in exile.”

They walked together back to her suite in near-silence, Master Botkin continuing to support her without commenting on how little improvement there was in her strength. It occurred to her that she had no idea how old he was and how he'd come to the Little Palace, not because she hadn't asked, but because no one seemed to know. When she sat down in the chair closest to the door of her room, an elegant little caned chair that seemed chiefly to be for the decorative receipt of shawls, pelisses, and various and sundry accessories, she thought to thank him but he spoke before she did.

"I will not talk to the General of what happened without your permission, Sun Summoner. But if you grant that, I will not evade his questions, nor will I...downplay the events as they occurred, not saving my own failure of oversight," he said.

"You didn't do anything wrong," Alina replied. It still hurt to breathe and her light felt distant, as if it had gone to a place it was too great a strain to reach.

"But you are injured and I did not prevent it," he said. "Whatever the General's assessment, I have failed you on my own terms."

"People get injured in the training sessions all the time," she said. "Not even the Healers mind very much. It's how we learn, at least partly—"

"This was not training. Miss Nazyalensky was not engaged in formal combat, she did not observe the rules of engagement, and her attacks on you were most personal in nature," he said.

"Oh, that," Alina said, waving her hand about. It felt like it was made of lead, some contraption of David's that wasn't working properly.

"I know what is it to be told you are not Grisha when you are," he said. "To be cast out, cast aside from those already living in the shadows, simply because of my heritage. The General is a wise man, learned, with wide experience, but his own life has not taught him this lesson. Miss Nazyalensky is half-Suli, that makes her words, her actions, even less defensible."

"Then she has her work cut out for her, doesn't she? If she has to explain herself to General Kirigan," Alina said. She was taken aback by Master Botkin's directness, but it was a relief to hear him talk, to see eyes like her own reflect her face.

"She does," he said. "I suspect she'll manage it, but not without a cost to herself. A cost dearer than she would have anticipated."

"The General won't forgive her easily, you mean," Alina said.

"He won't be the only one. He wasn't the only one who hoped to find a Sun Summoner," Master Botkin said. "And the Grisha who are not Ravkan-born, the Fjerdans and the Zemeni and Kerch, the few Kaelish and the fewer Shu who find their way to the Little Palace, they also wanted you to come."

“It wasn’t me they wanted, it was maybe the idea of me,” she said.

“You are better than the idea they had. You are real, with your temper and your laughter and your much-lauded loathing for herring,” he said. “Nazyalensky made a poor choice. She could have made you an ally, even a friend, and now—”

“And now, she’s worse than an enemy. She’s a supplicant and she’ll cause me no end of trouble, but I can’t give up on her,” Alina said. Master Botkin did something then that was even more unusual than all the other unusual things he’d already done—he smiled.

“No, you can’t. You won’t,” he said. “I’ll leave you now. Make them give you the pepper soup with their tonics.”

“Because it has healing properties for Squaller-inflct injuries?”

“No, because it’s the Head Cook’s specialty. And the General doesn’t like it,” Botkin said.

The pepper soup was delicious. Aleksander’s expression upon finding her ordered to her bed when it was time for their shatranj game and then hearing an expurgated explanation from Healer Balakina who had agreed to remain until he arrived, to spare Alina a second exposure to unrestrained Grisha power, was less so, but he schooled his features into a blandness acceptable to Liucija and kept his tone measured after the door closed behind her.

“Will you tell me what happened?”

Alina, having been Healed and pleasantly full of spicy pepper soup, patted a spot beside her where she lay in the wide bed.

“Come sit down, Sashenka,” she said.

“That’s not an answer,” he said but he walked over and settled himself down, almost as if he weren’t wearing his usual black kefta buttoned to his throat, every bit of him exquisitely turned out, but a loosely belted banyan in some dark color that wasn’t black, his feet bare. “You aren’t going to give me one? You know I can find out.”

“I know you can. I know you won’t, because you wouldn’t do that. You wouldn’t bring it up if that’s what you meant to do,” Alina said. “I’m all right, let’s start there—I don’t want you getting upset for nothing and you can see there’s nothing to upset you—I’m resting and the Healers have said that’s all I need now.”

“Now,” he said. “I’m not feeling reassured, Alina.”

“There was an incident in the training rooms. A conversation that took an unexpected turn. If I spent more time with Master Botkin, I might have acquitted myself better,” she said. She wanted to tell him the truth, she wanted him to know she would, but she didn’t want him agonizing, for his own sake and for hers as well. “I got distracted, I was thinking of something Mal wrote in his last letter, how I should remember where I came from. I think I wasn’t alone in that.”

“Do you mean to speak to me in riddles?” Aleksander said, reaching over to take her hand in his, letting the force of his shadow slide along her light, making her sigh with the peace of it. His lips curved in a small smile. “I’ll be frank, *milaya*, I’m terrible at solving them.”

“Zoya remembers how it used to be,” Alina said, bringing his hand closer, bringing him that much closer to her, near enough she could touch his bearded cheek if she wanted to.

“That—it was never serious, between us,” he said, earnest as a boy.

“I think she knows that,” Alina said. “It doesn’t mean that’s what she wanted—”

“I never made her a promise, she received no special favors,” he said.

“Didn’t she? Isn’t your company alone a special favor, General Kirigan, Lord of the Grisha?” Alina said. “Hardly any of the rest of them have ever seen you as anything else, maybe Ivan, Fedyor—”

“You’re saying Zoya feels herself a woman scorned, when she had no claim on me? That she sees you as a threat, a rival?” he replied.

“I think she isn’t a person used to coming in second, with anyone,” Alina said. “She thought, or, probably, she felt—”

“Even before you were here, Alina, that is not what it was between us. No matter what she thought or felt. You have no rival,” he said. “As the Sun Summoner, you cannot. As Alina, you do not. Will not. I’m not making a promise, I am stating the incontrovertible truth.” He brought her hand to his lips and kissed it lightly.

“And now, will you tell me what happened?” he asked.

“I told you, it was a dispute,” she said. “It doesn’t matter.”

“You said it was an incident and it does matter. You were hurt, if the Healers came,” he said.

“Nothing serious—”

“You expect me to take that on faith? Would you accept it if I said the same to you?” he pressed.

“It wasn’t serious and you know that. If it had been, I would’ve blinded everyone in the vicinity with my light, like I did on the skiff. You would’ve felt me call,” she said. “Zoya isn’t a Fjerdan assassin. And now you can trust at least that she doesn’t have some master plot against either of us—she couldn’t have put herself in a worse position to carry out anything secret.”

“I don’t like this, Alina,” he said, not specifying what exactly he didn’t care for—that she’d been attacked by another Grisha, again, that she wasn’t telling him everything, which she wasn’t and they both knew it, that neither of them could be sure what would keep her safe—to be closer to him or more distant.



“I know,” she said, closing her eyes for a moment and slumping back onto the pillows.

“I can go,” he said.

“Why would you think that would make me feel better?” she asked.

“I can stay,” he said and she could hear the happiness in his voice. “I’ll just—”

“Lie down with me,” she said. He had to remember the first time he’d said as much to her, what seemed like such a long time ago, in the cottage in the woods, a bleak, cold night ahead of them, two strangers who’d recognized something in each other. “For a little while, anyway.”

“Of course,” he said, letting go of her hand to unfasten his kefta and take off his boots before he settled himself beside her. “Sometime, it would be nice to do this without one of us being hurt or sick or cold.”

“It would,” she said, moving to lay her head against his chest, feeling his arm wrap around her. She felt him relax, his body and his power both easing with the contact, his breath even and soft. They were quiet for a while and then she spoke.

“Mal said to remember where I’m from. Zoya said I didn’t belong here.”

“You’ll never forget Keramzin, you don’t need any reminders,” Aleksander murmured, moving slightly so that he could brush his lips across the crown of her head. “And you belong here. I made this place for you, long before you were born, *moya dusha*.”

“But you didn’t know about me, the Sun Summoner was just a myth everyone says,” she replied, his hand stroking her hair.

“I hoped. The world is filled with impossible horrors. Why could it not bring forth an impossible good? As the years went by and I lived and lived, I thought, if I were patient, if I made a place for you to come to, one day, you would,” he replied. “And you did.”

The next morning, Alina woke up alone, as she had expected. Aleksander had kissed her before he left, the briefest touch of his lips to hers, the tickle of his beard against her skin, wordless in the moonlight; he drew the curtains closed as he walked out of the room. She slept for a long time, the suite full of sunlight and her own strength returned to her, finding Genya bustling about with one of the younger maid she sent off to run the bath. The heady fragrance of clove pinks drifted in and Alina smiled as she caught a whiff of the scented bath oil.

“You look well today,” Genya said, perched on the side of the bed, not far from where Aleksander had been.

“That’s good. I wouldn’t want people to get the wrong idea about yesterday,” Alina said.

“I don’t think they will,” Genya replied. Her auburn hair lit by the sun, she glowed like a sankta’s gilded ikon.

“You say that but in a way that makes me think you’re not just talking about my appearance,” Alina said. “I admit, I don’t really look forward to dealing with Zoya—”

“You don’t have to,” Genya said, before Alina could say anything more. “She’s gone.”

“What?”

“The General,” Genya replied. “He sent her away. To rethink her priorities.”

“That’s what he said?”

“That’s what we’ve been told,” Genya said, shrugging very elegantly. It was clear there would be no overt challenge to the General’s edict, for a variety of reasons. Genya patted her on the knee, revealing a glimpse of a delicately faceted gold bracelet, each link chased with an obscure design, the workmanship too fine to be anything other than that of a master. “How about a soak in the tub and then breakfast?”

## Chapter End Notes

Morta (died c. 1263) was wife of Mindaugas, the first known ruler of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. She was the Grand Duchess of Lithuania (until 1253) and later Queen consort of Lithuania (1253–1262). Her life is briefly described in the Livonian Rhymed Chronicle. The Chronicle paints an image of a capable woman who advised her husband in political affairs and even provides several colorful dialogues between her and Mindaugas. According to the Chronicle, she supported Lithuanian conversion to Christianity, opposed Treniota, and defended the Christians when Mindaugas relapsed to his pagan faith.

## Chapter 22

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“What’s this?” Alina said, picking up the unfamiliar ornament and handling it gently. She wasn’t sure what exactly it was made of, having some of the warmth of wood and some of the weight of clay, an intricate pattern inlaid along its curves, but it felt old in a way she wouldn’t have been able to explain. He’d nodded when she chose it, acknowledging that it was something he’d wanted kept rather than the forcefully carved horse sculpture or heavy crystal vase that had been given as gifts to General Kirigan and displayed from respect, not affection.

“That’s an ocarina. It’s like a gemshorn, you might have heard it called that in Keramzin,” he said, taking a sip from his teacup, his expression fond, the shadows cast by the firelight friendly with his own.

“It’s a musical instrument then,” Alina said. “Did you ever play it?”

“I did. It was a gift from a friend, someone I lost a long time ago,” he said.

“Not Luda,” Alina said.

“No, not Luda. A friend who lived, the full span of his allotted days, who died well. At peace,” Aleksander said. “At the end, he believed I was my own son, but that only made him kinder to me.”

“What was his name?” Alina asked.

“Ivan,” Aleksander smiled. “No relation to the one you know, for all that your Ivan sometimes reminds me of my old friend.”

“My Ivan seems a very odd way to put it,” Alina said, turning the ocarina around in her hands. “I can’t imagine he’d see himself as belonging to me.”

“I think you’re wrong,” Aleksander said. “And not simply because he swore that oath to protect you. I wouldn’t go so far as to say he trusts you, but there is something between you \_\_\_”

“An obligation, maybe. Or guilt,” Alina interjected.

“Something more than that. Fedyor would know how to put it better,” Aleksander said.

“Do you still play the ocarina?” Alina asked, returning to the conversation’s usual sequence, her questions about his past, his answers.

“Rarely,” Aleksander said. “This is when you ask me to play something for you, isn’t it?”

“I mean, not if it’s going to upset you,” she said. “But I admit, I’m curious. I’d like to hear you.”

“I’m quite rusty. I’d do better with my khiil,” he said but he held out his hand to take the ocarina. Alina settled back in her own chair, tucking her feet under her, ready to grin at some squeaky notes and then at Aleksander’s own rueful smile.

Instead, as he raised it to his lips and began to play, she felt as if he’d bewitched her, except that the melody he played was so melancholy, so plaintive and evocative, her eyes filled with tears. Aleksander’s own eyes were closed, his fingers moving along the ocarina, his body canted forward slightly, and she thought he must have chosen the song he knew best, loved best, because the breath behind the notes was sure, however long it had been since he last played it. She hadn’t thought he could weave such complex harmonies while still filling the space between them with a sound like a nightingale, the last phrase lingering like his shadow did in the face of her own light.

“You said you were rusty,” she said when he’d opened her eyes and regarded her for a long moment. “Do you even know what rust is, Sasha? That was, that was—”

“That’s because it was you listening,” he said.

“Anyone would have thought what I did, felt what I did,” she said.

“I meant, it was because I was playing for you, you alone, Alya,” he said, setting the ocarina down next to his teacup.

“It was beautiful. I’ve never heard anything like it,” she said.

“Would you—” he paused, rubbed his hand along his jaw, tense as he hadn’t been before she asked him to play.

“Would I what?”

“Would you come sit with me? Would you let me hold you for a little while?” he said. “I feel a thousand times a fool for saying this, but you feel very far away.”

She answered by crossing the distance and settling herself as gracefully as she could manage on his lap, his arms around her at once, letting her head rest against his shoulder.

“This isn’t too crowded? I’m not too heavy?” she said.

“You, heavy? You’re perfect, *milaya*, perfect,” he said quietly, somehow pulling her even closer, making her aware of his lithe strength, his body revealed to her without their keftas’ disguise, without the gathering shadows waiting to be Summoned. She wanted him and she could sense his answering desire but she could tell too that neither of them felt a desperate urgency to act; it was enough to feel his warmth, to breathe in the scent of his skin, the sandalwood she now recognized he preferred and beneath, the fainter, provocative smell of his sweat, his heartbeat under her palm when she laid it against the linen of his tunic. In some other world, she would have slipped her hand beneath the cloth, arching her back to invite his

lips at her throat, at the tops of her breasts revealed by the wide neck of her nightgown, but they were content enough in this moment for her to let the other world remain a dream.

“Are you sorry I asked you about the ocarina?” she said.

“No. I hadn’t known it could be a pleasure, to talk about these things. I hadn’t known it would be such a pleasure to share them, to share my memories, with someone,” he said.

“I don’t have anything of my own here,” Alina said. “I don’t mean in your quarters, I mean in the Vezda suite, in the Little Palace. Then again, it wasn’t as if anything I had in Keramzin was really mine. Everything was a cast-off of someone else’s or belonged to the orphanage, to the Duke. There were rumors that Ana Kuya might give you something that had come with you when you left, but there wasn’t anything for me. In the First Army, my uniform, my equipment, it was all the Tsar’s. My wages weren’t enough to buy anything if I’d found something I wanted.”

“Except for your blue scarf,” Aleksander said.

“Right. And I didn’t manage to keep that either,” she said.

“My kefta and the gold veil, you have those, no?”

“Hidden away,” she said. “I’m not complaining, I just thought, your rooms are filled with any number of things, books and trinkets and all the little things that a person collects, and I have everything I could ever need in mine but—”

“But nothing that you chose. That means anything to you, nothing to pick up and hold and remember, or look at and delight in, to let someone else see if you invited them in,” he said.

“We can fix that, Alina.”

“Oh, I wasn’t...angling for you to get me things,” she said quickly.

“That thought never occurred to me,” he said. “In the cottage, I told you I would take you to a street market when I could, I would buy you a twist of iriska. The winter market has begun —”

“General Kirigan and the Sun Summoner could just go to the winter market? Like two ordinary people?” Alina said, shifting around so she could face him.

“I believe Genya could help with that. Tailor us, so that we might attract little attention,” he said.

“But, isn’t it...frivolous? Won’t it be a waste of your time?” He smiled at her and then dropped a kiss on the tip of her nose, a sweet, charming little kiss that startled her.

“No time spent with you is wasted, Alya. And anything that would make you happy isn’t frivolous, it’s of the utmost importance to me,” he said.

“Ivan, my Ivan according to you, he won’t like it,” Alina warned. “Even if we’re in Corecloth from head to toe.”

“I suppose he won’t. But Fedyor will make him understand and we’ll let him have the final say on Genya’s work, even though she’ll be put out by his criticism,” Aleksander replied.

“I don’t have any money to spend,” she said. “Not of my own—”

“Of course you do. You are a member of the Second Army, you are paid monthly. You must have a tidy little sum by now, since no one remembered to tell you or give you any chance to spend it. I do apologize for that, Alina. It would not have happened to another Grisha upon their formal enrollment in the Second Army, there’s really no excuse,” he said.

“I don’t know what to say,” she replied and he gave her another kiss, this time very close to her parted lips.

“Say you will come to the winter market with me tomorrow and say that you will not laugh too much at what Genya does to transform me into her best idea of an *otkazat’sya*. Say you will let me buy you *iriska* and something else, something you will leave out on your writing desk to look at and remember,” he said, brushing the hair back from her face. “Say you will let me make this place start to become your home.”

Alina touched his bearded cheek, drawing her finger along his jaw and down to his chin.

“She won’t Tailor this away, will she?”

“No, not for a single afternoon,” he said, the words practical but his tone...

“Good,” Alina said. “I would miss it. How it looks, how it feels.”

He turned his face into her hand then, just enough for her to feel the movement, to feel how he sought her caress.

“You’ll come then,” he said.

“Yes, I will.”

“I could wear a scarf. Or a hat. Or two hats,” Alina said, knowing she was getting carried away even without the mildly exasperated look on Genya’s face. She had told herself not to be disappointed if Aleksander had to cancel, knowing that his responsibilities were vast and that he could be called to the Tsar’s court at any moment, but she had heard nothing from him other than the brief note he’d had delivered with her breakfast which simply read *I’ll meet you at 3 pm--ABK*. She had had to cast a dozen *sfera*, collected like chicken eggs in a basket she wove of light in order to calm herself down enough to study in the Library.

“You’ll do no such thing,” Genya replied, scrutinizing Alina’s face, reaching over and rubbing a lock of hair between her thumb and forefinger. “But I wonder—”

“What? You have a very peculiar expression on your face, Genya, you’re making me nervous —”

“Have you ever considered going blonde?”

“Blonde? For Saints’ sake, as a half-Shu mapmaker in the First Army, no, I can’t say that thought ever crossed my mind,” Alina exclaimed. “Are you kidding me? Blonde?”

“No one would recognize you,” Genya said, with growing enthusiasm. “With the right shade, I wouldn’t have to alter your complexion much—”

“Blonde hair isn’t that common in Os Alta. The point is for me not to attract any attention at all,” Alina replied.

“You were just suggesting you would wear two hats, so you can stop acting like making you a blonde is the craziest idea in the world,” Genya said.

“I don’t want to look that different,” Alina admitted.

“Because of how you’ll feel? Or how he will?” Genya asked.

“Both, even though it should be neither,” Alina said. “I know that but I don’t believe it.”

“I understand,” Genya said. “And while I cannot deny I would dearly, dearly love to see the expression on General Kirigan’s face if you answered the door with your hair hanging over your shoulders in a pair of golden plaits woven with red ribbons, I can see why it would feel like too great a difference, when you’re only just getting used to being the Sun Summoner. When you don’t quite believe all this is real.”

“Thank you,” Alina said.

“Shall I make you a little mouse? Dull brown hair, dull brown eyes, a little paler?” Genya offered. “We can dress you like a guildsman’s daughter, a bit dumpy, a bit drab, a pair of stout laced boots on your feet, your shawl belted. I won’t alter the shape of your eyes much, just enough to make people convince themselves you aren’t really Shu if they take a good look at you.”

“That sounds all right,” Alina said. “How long will it last?”

“Six hours, give or take. Night will have fallen by the time it starts wearing off, in case you are not back at the Little Palace. You can put your shawl over your head if you have to,” Genya said.

“Ivan insisted everything I wear be made of Corecloth, since we are going out without guards,” Alina said.

“You don’t need everything made of Corecloth. Just a layer. I spoke with some of the durasts, I was able to get you a chemise made of a newer version that’s thinner than what they use for the keftas and a print kerchief you can tie at your neck to protect your throat. Ivan should have more confidence in my Tailoring—no one will think you and the General are anything other than a pair of lovesick otkazat’sya, people will only smile since he towers over you and he’ll be sure to have your arm tucked in his.”

“What will you do to Tailor him?” Alina asked.

“It doesn’t seem fair to tell you,” Genya said. “To give you all the advantage, if you will.”

“We’re not competing. I just—it would make it a little easier to have some idea what to expect when he comes to fetch me,” Alina said. Genya tapped her upper lip with her finger, the same one that would add a blush to Alina’s cheek or a shadow beneath her eye.

“Less than you expect. The General has a good deal of experience in passing unnoticed when he wants, without using his power. No matter what I do, the real alteration will be up to him, changing his gait, the way he holds himself, the look in his eyes, not their color,” Genya said.

She made them grey. Not as dark a grey as Ivan’s, more like a slate roof in the November rain, and they were dark, but not nearly as dark as Aleksander’s real eyes. Alina supposed that other people, people who were not in love with him, might not find them remarkable in any way, or anyway, she hoped so. He would have said something about her staring, except that he was staring right back at her, the intensity of their shared gaze almost like the first time, when he’d asked her *what are you* as if he suspected her of resisting him. Almost like her presentation to the Tsar, when he’d lifted her veil and looked at her with the deepest recognition, her face more familiar to him than his own.

“Will I do? I told Genya I could wear a hat but she ignored me,” Alina said.

“Yes. I don’t think anyone but me would recognize you this way,” he said. “She’s made you into a little sparrow, hasn’t she? She really is incredibly talented.”

“She said, a little mouse,” Alina replied. “And you, what did she use as inspiration for you?”

“A donkey,” he said, making her laugh. “Though I feel there is an homage to Tsarevich Vasily in the coloring as well.” Genya had lightened his hair and beard to a sandy brown shade and made him sallow and somewhat drawn, dressing him in rough, clearly mended clothes, the linen permanently stained with grime and sweat, a medal for Sankt Lubov slung around his neck, the stamped silver hummingbird tarnished; she’d even made sure to take his elegant hands and roughen them, the nails with a rime of dirt, calluses across his palms.

“You can’t say anything like that once we leave the Little Palace—no *otkazat’sya* man would, unless he was a radical,” Alina said. Aleksander took her arm in his, patted it, and began to walk towards the courtyard that would lead to the winter market.

“And that would be so terrible, would it? That I should be a radical?” he asked.

“It would be if we’re meant to attract no attention. To pass unnoticed in the crowd,” Alina replied. “Radicals aren’t known for their subtlety. Or stealth. Toppling monarchies or the Apparatus tends to pull for mayhem.”

“I’m glad to hear you have some sense of their movement,” Aleksander said.

“Why?”



“Because they may be useful to us. To the Grisha and to the two of us in particular,” Aleksander said. “Toppling monarchies or the Apparatus are little enough in comparison with what it takes to create a world the Grisha can live in safely.”

“But the Little Palace—”

“Everyone at the Little Palace is training to be in the Second Army or serves those who are. I know you think the First Army hard-done by and that the Second Army lives in comparative luxury, but the truth is, we are only the Tsar’s cannon fodder or the cannons themselves,” Aleksander said. “True safety would be being able to be something besides a soldier or a weapon. To use Grisha power for something besides the protection of borders and the ruling Tsar. And if I said anything like that in the streets of Os Alta, I would shock the most zealous otkazat’sya revolutionary.”

“Are you speaking from experience?” Alina asked, only partly in jest.

“Of course, *milaya*,” he said. “Besides my shadows, experience is what I command more than any other creature living. But don’t worry, I know what today is about—an outing that any two people might go on, a chance to wander through the market, for you to enjoy yourself—”

“You’re not going to enjoy yourself?” Alina said, pausing. Aleksander matched her, looked down into her altered face, smiling at her as if Genya had done nothing.

“If you are happy, when you are happy, I will be too,” he said.

“That’s the only way?”

“I told you about the iriska,” he said. “Don’t bandy it about, but I don’t think the kitchens in the Little Palace ever produce a dessert that equals what Gintare has at her stall.”

Alina was not such a connoisseur of confectionary, but Gintare’s iriska was delicious, though not as much as Aleksander’s expression when he put the first piece in his mouth; she felt herself blush at the look she recognized from the time she’d put her hand at the back of his neck and pulled him down to her. She hurriedly took the piece he offered and let the sweetness occupy her.

“It’s good,” she said, the words a little mumbled by the candy, and she felt his hand graze hers, looked up to see his eyes, grey instead of black, but with an expression of such understanding and humor and affection, an expression that said *I know, milaya, I know how it feels*, and instead he nodded and said,

“Let’s see what the winter market has to offer, Alya.”

The ocarina is a wind musical instrument—a type of vessel flute. Variations exist, but a typical ocarina is an enclosed space with four to twelve finger holes and a mouthpiece that projects from the body. It is traditionally made from clay or ceramic, but other materials are also used—such as plastic, wood, glass, metal, or bone. The ocarina belongs to a very old family of instruments, believed to date back over 12,000 years. The word ocarina in the Bolognese dialect of the Emiliano-Romagnolo language means "little goose." The earlier form was known in Europe as a gemshorn, which was made from animal horns of the chamois (Dutch: gems).

Kihil is a translation for violin though I honestly can't recall which language I used in Google Translate to get it.

Alina's reference to things being left for the orphans at Keramzin is a wink at my fic "you will always keep something broken about you." This whole chapter is a callback to the cottage in the woods outtake scene fic "The clear alternative to the king, the clown and the colonel."

## Chapter 23

The amber pendant Aleksander bought her hung on a fine gold chain woven through with arachne silk in a manner worthy of a Durast's touch; the stall-keeper assured him that it was well-nigh unbreakable, but Aleksander had still bargained out of respect for the man's wares and the expectations of the market, settling at a price that Alina assumed was better for the seller in his patched jacket, earning a nod from the man and a shy smile from Alina as Aleksander lifted the necklace over her head. She'd tucked it inside the bodice of her dress right away, feeling the gem draw warmth from her skin where it nestled between her breasts.

"They say it's made of sunlight, amber is," the stall-keeper had explained when Alina reached out a finger to touch the stone. "Nice to keep a bit about you, when the winter's so long and dark."

"It's yours," Aleksander said a little later, after the purchase was complete and they'd walked away from the stall. "I was only returning it to you, *solnyshka*, though I'd commission an amber diadem for you to wear, if I thought you'd agree to it."

She'd shaken her head at him and he'd smiled back, curiously like himself despite Genya's successful Tailoring which had rendered them unremarkable to the crowd in the market. Even without her alterations, Alina couldn't see herself in any sort of jeweled coronet, though she could just imagine her hair woven with bright ribbons for Sankta Maradi's feast-day, Aleksander's hands threading the silk through her hair as he'd once plaited it in the cottage in the woods. *It's yours*, he'd said, and she'd thought he was being romantic, but the weight of the pendant against her made her recognize how something had been missing before, some tangible confirmation of her power and Aleksander's devotion, something more primitive than the purl that held them together; his hands had touched it in the giving and now her skin gave it heat and an odd sort of life no other gem could have.

It wasn't all that she'd brought home from the winter market.

The little wooden sparrow caught her eye though it was stained as perfectly dun-colored as a living bird, tucked amid a clutter of a dozen or more larger, more elaborately carved animals, rabbits and ducks and a vixen that put her in mind of Genya's bright hair and brighter eyes. The stall held all sort of handcrafts, a quilt pieced with a complicated pattern Alina knew would have merited Ana Kuya's rare praise and an inlaid box to hold pens and ink-bottles with a cunningly cast metal lock she could see as Alexei's pride and joy. The woman minding the stall spoke primarily to Aleksander, cordial but clearly seeing him as the one more likely to make a purchase, the one worth her attention, until he turned to face Alina and tilted his head in wordless inquiry.

"The bird, the little sparrow," she said and he smiled, his glance taking in Genya's Tailoring, his lips quirked wryly.

"You're sure that's what you want most?" he asked and she nodded.

"Not flowers or a new silk kerchief or a brooch to wear on your name-day?" he pressed.

“Just the sparrow,” she said. “I’m sure. I’ll like to see it on my...work-table.”

“When you’re sewing?” he said, knowing how little she cared for needlework. Enjoying the tableau they’d conjured between them, the humble household, the basket piled high with mending that Alina took in to make extra money along with the hens she kept for eggs.

“It’ll be a nice little companion when you’re away with your cart,” she replied, making him into an itinerant peddler, the kind frequently seen in any Ravkan city, wearing a threadbare coat and sturdy boots.

“We could get you a kitten,” he said, his grey eyes bright. “Boris, in the next street, his wife Katya has a litter and their mother is a good mouser.”

“Maybe,” Alina said. “But I’d still want the sparrow.”

“You know what they say, happy wife, happy life,” the woman behind the stall’s counter interrupted, startling them both. Aleksander recovered sooner, somehow managed to keep his expression placid and almost dull.

“The sparrow and also the needle-case, the one with the black silk embroidery,” Aleksander said.

“That’s not necessary, you mustn’t waste your money,” Alina said.

“Let him spoil you, dear. I’m sure it’s well-deserved.” There was no way the woman was going to let one single kopek slip through her fingers.

“Yes, let me spoil you,” Aleksander repeated.

“Once the children come along, he’ll stop. They all do,” the woman said. Alina felt herself flush and Aleksander was suddenly very still. She didn’t dare to look into his eyes, to see how he’d reacted to the woman’s remark, the suggestion of Alina holding a child of theirs in her arms, another in her belly, a toddler with Aleksander’s dark eyes playing at her feet. “The little ones always arrive faster than you expect and then the mending basket is never empty. You’ll be glad of such a fine needle-case.”

“It’s as the Saints oversee,” Alina said, wishing she were not included in that category by anyone, that she and Aleksander were the ordinary couple the woman took them to be, that he brought darkness by drawing closed the curtains she’d hemmed a little unevenly and she conjured light with a match to a wick, their evenings full of the melody of his ocarina, the soft thud of the shatranj pieces being knocked on their side, the wood falling to ash in the brick stove.

“Here,” Aleksander said, a little gruff, offering a handful of coins.

“You mustn’t mind me,” the woman said. “Didn’t mean to make you shy. It’s just pleasant to see two such as yourselves and on such a fine market day as we haven’t had for ages, since the Sun Summoner came to Os Alta even. Here’s the sparrow and the needle-case and as a token of my goodwill, take this spoon. It’s made for honey, for adding sweetness to the cup of

life.” She tucked a small wooden spoon into the sack with the bird and the case, Alina glimpsing the round belly of a honeybee carved into the spoon’s handle.

“Good day to you, then,” Alina said as Aleksander took the sack and turned away, squinting a bit against the sunshine. They walked in silence until they were out of earshot the stall-keeper and her neighbors, until they were near enough to a fountain whose water lay frozen in its well, a scrying ball if you were willing to admit you believed in those kind of things, as Nadia and Marie, two of the younger Grisha women, did without any real embarrassment. The marble of the fountain was pristine, unlike the one Aleksander had taken her to before, and when she looked closely, Alina could even see a few kopeks gleaming in the ice. A wishing well, at least for some, but not for her.

“Is that what you would want?” Aleksander said. “That life, that smallness, the four walls, the handwork—”

“The children,” Alina interrupted. “Is it what you would want?”

“I asked you first,” he said and she laughed.

“It seems there is already a child here,” she said. She reached over and took his free hand. “To be honest, I don’t know. Mal always said he wanted a farm of his own, a wife and a family and I cared about him so much, he was all I had, I told myself that would be what I would want.”

“But it wasn’t. Isn’t,” Aleksander said. “Even before you knew who you truly were.”

“I wanted to travel places. To go to the library in the University of Ketterdam and open any book. To open all the books and then go to one of those places they have where they serve kaffe and they say, there are all sorts of pastries—”

“A kaffehaus, on the Straand, overlooking the canal,” Aleksander said. “They have savories there too, I know you prefer those.”

“I wanted to go on a ship and see the edge of the world. And then go beyond it,” she said.

“Alone?” he asked.

“If I had to be,” she said. “I never met anyone who wanted what I did. Even the other mapmakers only ever wanted to go home. I didn’t have a home, so I couldn’t want to go there.”

“And now?” he said.

“If I let myself imagine it, you’re next to me,” she said, smiling, seeing in his odd grey gaze the familiar expression of reassured relief. “If I imagine it now, there’s no Tsar to worry about, no Fjerdans trying to murder us. We’re just sailors, explorers, guided by the north star and our hearts and the wind,” she said. The wind would ruffle his dark hair, bring color to his cheeks, make his lips taste of salt when she went up on her tip-toes to kiss him. “And maybe someday—”

“Someday?”

“Maybe someday we find a place we like best, with a lively winter market and a harbor for tall ships and an academy, and that’s where we live. My work-table is for drawing and you use your cart as a lending library for your bookshop where the radicals meet in the evenings. And there’s a trundle bed with a nine-patch quilt and a little tin lantern for a night-light,” Alina said. “So they’ll never be afraid of the dark.”

“She is Grisha?” Aleksander said.

“They both are. Someday, younglings can grow up with their parents and the Little Palace can become a conservatory,” Alina said.

“That sounds like a very fine someday, Alya,” Aleksander said. “I would still get you the kitten. It’s nice to have a cat about and they are equally at home in shadow and sunlight.”

# Chapter 24

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Alina had no sooner set the little wooden sparrow in the niche beside her bed than there was a rap at her door, the door opening even as she called out *Come in*. There were few who would not have waited for her to offer a welcome.

“You must come with me to the General’s War Room right away,” Ivan said. “There has been a...development—”

“Ivan?” Alina said, pulling on her kefta, fastening only a few of the clasps in her haste to leave.

“One of our Grisha has returned from abroad with some news. And a companion,” Ivan said. “I cannot say more until we are in a secured location.”

“Is he in danger?” Alina signed, keeping her hand against the dark skirt of her kefta to put the gestures in unmistakable relief. A few months ago, Togtuun had placed the old text atop a pile Alina had been working her way through and suggested Alina might find the instruction therein useful in all sorts of situations, though they’d noted it was not a skill widely held in these modern times; it had taken an afternoon’s intense study for Alina to master the rudiments of the Ravkan handspeak though Togtuun had been quite willing to offer pointers when Alina made her first several attempts. The look on Ivan’s face was the purest form of approval Alina had ever had from the man, an expression that said he counted her as not merely an equal but an ally of unknown resources. Alina had not specified who he was; between the two of them, he could only ever mean Aleksander.

“Not right now,” Ivan signed back, inclining his head to indicate she follow him. “Does he know you have the handspeak?”

“No,” she said, her fingers drawn up into a tight fist for the negative.

“Good,” Ivan replied. “Good.”

“Why?”

They’d walked quickly, the hem of Alina’s kefta floating around her ankles and now they were almost in front of Aleksander’s door, Alina almost breathless from the pace.

“He needs to know he can rely on you,” Ivan said aloud and then signed, “He needs to know you will be more than he expected. That you can be young but wise.” He laid his hand very lightly on her own and she felt the most unusual sensation as he settled her heartbeat into the rhythm of a peaceful awakening with a delicacy she would not have thought him capable of.

“I didn’t know you could do that,” she signed.

“Good,” he said and opened the door.

Her eyes went first to Aleksander, standing in front of the War Room table, all Ravka laid out before him, his serious expression altering very slightly as he met her gaze, something of the moment when he’d lifted the gold veil in his look and something of the moment she’d spoken of his mother’s exhortations. Togtuun, in their chestnut brown kefta, stood by the bookshelves, a backdrop that mitigated the oddness of seeing the Librarian out of the Library, and David Kostyk was looking at the window, his hands occupied by some metal object Alina could not clearly see, except that it fit in the palm of his hand.

The other two people in the room were strangers, at least to Alina.

The woman, tall, plump and buxom with abundant auburn hair haphazardly pinned up, had the look of a Grisha though she wore the clothes of the Kerch countrywoman, her hem mud-stained and the embroidered flowers at her cuffs beginning to fray; she stood far too close to Aleksander to be anyone other than one raised at the Little Palace, familiar with the General, respectful but not cowed. She had a wide mouth that seemed made for smiling, but she looked anything but cheerful at the moment, her broad brow furrowed.

The man was the only person sitting down, looking both awkward and formal, stiff and ill-at-ease. His bright blond hair was shaggy and he was in need of a shave, his clothes drab but scrupulously neat, his worn boots polished to a shine. When he raised his eyes to look at Alina, she saw they were a clear, deep blue with an expression she recognized.

“A drüskelle? At the Little Palace?” Alina exclaimed.

“It’s not what you think—” the woman began.

“You’re safe,” Aleksander said, speaking as if the woman had stayed silent, as if they were two alone in the room with their shared memory of the attacks they’d barely survived. She would not have wanted to admit she was frightened, but he’d seen it and offered reassurance before she could even ask for it. “I would never let anyone hurt you—”

“Like I said, you’ve got it wrong, you don’t have to worry,” the woman said. “He’s with me. I’m Nina Zenik, by the way. The introductions seem to have fallen by the wayside, which seems like an oversight on Ivan’s part, to be honest—”

“You should appreciate my discretion, Nina,” Ivan said. “If what you say is true.”

“I can’t tell whether you’re casting aspersions on my integrity or my competence as a spy, Vanyushka,” Nina said. The use of the nickname merited no reaction from anyone in the room, which in and of itself was a surprise to Alina. “Neither is very flattering, to either of us really, since you trained me.”

“I believe he was expressing his wish that what you have told us was merely, how did he put it earlier, ‘a pack of lies designed to destabilize our internal hierarchy?’ I got it right, no?” Togtuun said.



“As usual, the Librarian is correct,” Ivan said. “You must understand, Nina, how much better it would be if it were only a ruse.”

“I do. But I wouldn’t have wasted your time with that or risked blowing my cover and I certainly wouldn’t have stowed away in a Zemeni trawler with a cargo of spider-eels if I could have just sent a little note in cypher through the usual contacts,” Nina said. There was a collective pause as they all processed Nina’s particularly evocative comment, even the drüskelle grimacing in recollection. If it weren’t so easy to imagine him with his knife driven into her throat, Alina could see he was rather handsome in an icy sort of way.

“I’m Alina Starkov, the Sun Summoner,” Alina said, though she suspected it was unnecessary.

“My name is Matthias Helvar,” the blond man said, still seated. Alina wondered whether he was allowed to stand; even sitting, she could tell he was very tall and would loom over everyone except Aleksander. “I’m a Fjerdan and Miss Starkov is correct, I have been a drüskelle.”

“But not anymore,” Nina said, a little too brightly.

“This will only work if you let him speak for himself, Nina,” Aleksander said.

“Or you will kill me,” Matthias said.

“If any Grisha were in the custody of the drüskelle, there would be no options,” Aleksander said, entirely the General, the shadows in the room deepening. Alina knew her own control of the light was eons away from the subtlety of Aleksander’s mastery. “Allowing you into the Little Palace is a tremendous breach of security and frankly, your life is not worth even one of my Grisha to me, let alone the number we have here. You must be at our mercy, for there is none for us outside these walls, certainly not if you leave and betray us.”

“I know that. I wanted Nina to listen to you,” Matthias said. He was younger than Alina had first thought, young enough to want the most powerful person in the room to appreciate he wasn’t a fool, even a little relieved that Aleksander must take responsibility for all of them and that Matthias could be permitted to simply react.

“Good luck with that,” Ivan muttered and Togtuun nodded.

“We’re all familiar with Nina’s proclivities,” the Librarian remarked.

“It’s her greatest strength,” David offered. “It probably why you’re alive.”

“Oh, that’s another story entirely,” Nina said. Beneath her off-handed tone, Alina heard something tense but private, something the woman wouldn’t want revealed to her superior officers or possibly any of the other Grisha. “This isn’t exactly who I thought would be here, but it’s everyone, right? We’re not waiting for anyone else?”

“No,” Aleksander said. “Those present are the only ones I want aware at this point. Ivan, that means you cannot speak of this to Fedyor.”

“Of course, *moi soverenyi*,” Ivan said.

“Nina, if you would?” Aleksander said.

“To put it bluntly, there’s a plot to overthrow the Tsar, replace him and put the blame on General Kirigan and his inner circle,” Nina said. “So, present company very much included.”

“What?” Alina cried.

“I thought I was fairly clear,” Nina said, wrinkling her nose in confusion as she looked at Alina. “Oh, you little duck, you’re shocked. Is it the overthrowing the Tsar part or the pinning the blame on the General that’s the surprise? You’re not surprised to be in the inner circle, you’re the Sun Summoner.”

“All of it, I suppose,” Alina said. “But none of the rest of you are shocked—”

“There’s nothing new about the overall scenario,” David said. “The surprising part is in the details.”

“The details?”

“It’s the Prince,” Nina said. “Who’s planning it.”

“Prince Vasily?” Alina said. She couldn’t believe that a spine of steel was lodged within the Prince’s stodgy, slope-shouldered frame. Vasily with his wispy hair and unpleasantly brassy whiskers, his dull gaze brightening only at the mention of prime horseflesh—he was conspiring to depose his father? It was hard to see why he’d want to be the Tsar, when he already appeared to have every benefit of the position and minimal expectations.

“Oh, Saints save you, no,” Nina said, nearly laughing. “Prince Nikolai. Prince Vasily couldn’t plan his way out of a leaky pickle-barrel.”

“Nina, you are too glib,” Matthias said, sounding tired, as if he’d said the same thing a dozen times before.

“You’d prefer me to be deadly serious,” she replied. “Fine. There is a well-developed and thought-out plot to depose the Tsar, eliminate him and the Tsaritsa and Prince Vasily, and have the throne overtaken by Nikolai, who has dangerous allies and undeniable resources, both personal and financial, and the Grisha are the pawns to be sacrificed, but most especially General Kirigan, because Nikolai cannot risk any challenge to his power, not by the General alone and certainly not a joint effort with the Sun Summoner who has already been essentially anointed in the countryside as Sankta Alina. Is that better, Matthias?”

“It’s not a matter of better—”

“How do you know your intelligence is accurate?” Ivan interrupted. “That your sources are not trying to trick us into a pursuit of Nikolai Lantsov which is ill-considered and useless, except that it embroils us in the Imperial Court’s machinations, pitting the entire Court and First Army against General Kirigan.”

“Because he told me himself,” Matthias said. “Prince Nikolai. He told me the whole plan, believing me to be a sympathetic drüskelle. He offered me money to join and a title if I wanted it. He was generous when he didn’t have to be, confident. He told me enough so that I would know it wasn’t just idle talk over a pitcher of ale. He paid for the ale too.”

“And Matthias told me,” Nina said. “Though not about the free drinks.”

“You wouldn’t have us believe you have revealed all this out of some sense of honor,” Ivan said. “And if you had some Grisha relative, you would have mentioned it by now. Otkazat’sya who do always make sure to tell us, as if that is enough to win our trust.”

“It’s not honor,” Matthias said.

“He’s afraid,” David said. “I know because I am also afraid.”

“Afraid of what?” Aleksander said quickly.

“Of what a curious, clever Prince might accomplish, who has been away from the Court long enough to learn all we don’t know,” David said.

“He’s quite charming, the little Lantsov,” Togtuun said. “And easy on the eyes, like his father in so many respects. One could hardly blame the Tsaritsa—”

“You can’t mean Tsar Pyotr,” Alina said.

“And I don’t,” Togtuun replied.

“After Vasily was born, the Tsaritsa was left to her own devices far more,” Aleksander said, offering the explanation that Togtuun seemed to feel unnecessary. “She missed her homeland, their ways, the attentions of a man who valued her for more than her womb. It was not spoken of, but it was not unexpected. It didn’t matter. Vasily was six when Nikolai was born, sturdy enough, had survived all the childhood fevers.”

“The cuckoo in the nest,” Alina said very softly. She thought only Aleksander would hear her, certainly he would be the only one likely to know what she meant, what she remembered of Dame Baghra’s ranting, but then she saw Togtuun watching her with an expression almost like a smile and wondered again what the brown kefta signified and if anyone besides Togtuun and Aleksander knew.

“He underestimates you, sir,” Matthias said. “I have only been here for a few hours but I can see that.”

“You suggest his over-confidence will lead to his destruction?” Aleksander said.

“No, that would be too simple,” Matthias replied.

“But it’s not a lot more complicated,” Nina put it. “That’s at the root of it, that’s what we can start to exploit.”

“Tomorrow, I think,” Aleksander said. “David, please secure Mr. Helvar.”

“What?” Nina finally looked surprised, which made Alina wonder how close the woman was to the Aleksander, if she had thought her word alone would be enough for Matthias Helvar to move freely about the Little Palace.

“David has created a device. It will allow us to know where Mr. Helvar is at all times. If it is removed and Mr. Helvar is found, he will be summarily executed,” Aleksander said. “It is an alternative to chains in the cellblock.”

“But someone could take it from him,” Nina protested.

“He’ll have to make sure they don’t,” Ivan said. “He looks to be able to defend himself. He’s a drüskelle, Nina, whatever you want to believe. If he cannot keep this token safe on his person, he’ll die. We’re not keeping it a secret from him.”

“It’s not very noticeable,” David said, handing the leather and metal contraption to Matthias. “You bind it around your upper arm, there are a series of knots to pull and the metal disc must touch your skin.”

“It’s a charm?” Matthias asked as he took the device. “Grisha magic.”

“No, I’ve told you a thousand times, we don’t do magic,” Nina said. “It’s science. David is just uncommonly good at it.”

“You’ll take him to the Zochin Suite and stay there with him, Nina,” Aleksander said. “You have vouched for him, you’ll share his quarters. The other Grisha cannot know yet that you have returned and with such a companion.”

“The Zochin Suite only has one—”

“I’ll be right next door if you need anything at all,” Togtuun interrupted. “It’s quiet on that wing, the servants come less often. But I’ll hear you if you call.”

“You are dismissed,” Aleksander said. “Miss Starkov, a word before you go.”

The others filed out, Ivan in the lead and Togtuun at the back, winking at Alina before turning to Matthias and linking their arm through his; though he towered over them, they did not seem that much smaller and their kefta billowed behind them in an unusual fashion Alina hadn’t seen before, as if the air were being managed and the cloth and the light. As soon as the door shut, Aleksander walked over to her and took her right hand in both of his.

“You’re safe,” he said.

“You already told me that,” she answered.

“It bears repeating,” he said, too serious to smile. “I’ll keep you safe, whatever happens—”

“You’re not asking the same of me. You don’t even seem to imagine it, let alone expect it,” Alina said, laying her left hand on his chest. “You’re the primary target. I can be sequestered in a bower as Sankta Alina and wile away my days with books and offerings and endless incense, but this plot will only succeed if you are killed. I want you to be safe as much as you

want that for me, Sasha. If you would Summon your shadows to protect me, you have to let me do the same with my light.”

“I’ll try,” he said. “That’s all I can promise.”

“You’re not the only one who’s protecting me,” Alina said. “Ivan and David and it seems like Togtuun, though I don’t see how.”

“Togtuun will decide if and when you do,” Aleksander said. “In that regard, every Grisha is alike, at their mercy, fortunate that Togtuun is content with the Library and the massive budget I provide to stock it. No one argues with the Librarian.”

“This is the word you wanted with me?” Alina asked.

“No,” he replied, dropping her hand and reaching to take her into his arms. “There are things we must discuss, strategies and options, but I just need this for a moment, to feel you safe and warm.” She laid her head against his chest and felt him hold her closer, felt him grow calmer when she moved so she could see his face, his dark eyes looking down at her with the greatest tenderness. If he kissed her now, she could deny him nothing, but he parted his lips only to speak.

“Perhaps you were right,” he said. “That we shouldn’t marry yet.”

“What?”

“You are safer from Nikolai as Sankta Alina than the wife of General Kirigan, the Sun Summoner to my Darkling,” he said.

“If that was the only reason, I would marry you right here, right now, the old handfasting from Tsibeya that doesn’t need a witness, only the couple and a thread from over each one’s heart,” Alina said.

“I wouldn’t agree,” he said.

“I’d make you. I can be very persuasive,” she said, teasing only in her tone, her eyes determined. “You can’t have forgotten that from the cottage.”

“I haven’t forgotten anything, Alinochka,” he said. And then he did lower his head to kiss her, part apology and part proof, soft and then seeking, breaking away only to return with something like desperation, something she could soothe only with her hand cupping the back of his head and the spill of her light, feeling him settle, his desire for her banked though the press of his body against hers told her he was exerting all his willpower to keep from unfastening her kefta and slipping his hands below its folds to caress her before fumbling with the ribbon at the neck of her chemise.

“Ivan said I had to come to you, there’d been a development and I have to tell you, I hoped it was the kitten you promised,” Alina said, mostly to make him laugh, which he did, and then kissed her again but lightly, in parting.

“I wish it had been the kitten as well, a little calico easily made content with a bowl of milk. Nikolai may underestimate me, but I cannot do the same,” he said. “Tomorrow, we will meet with David, you and I. As I said, there are options we must discuss, but they can wait until the morning. I’ll take you back to your room now.”

“I can’t decide if you are that worried about my safety walking the short distance between your rooms and mine or whether you just want to put off the moment when I have to go and leave you behind with a door shut between us,” Alina said as he guided her to the threshold of his room with his hand at the small of her back.

“Yes,” Aleksander answered, which made her roll her eyes and then squeeze his hand quickly before they went out into the hall, where they could be seen.

“There is no door that shuts between us,” Alina said, leaning against the closed door of her room, facing her bed. Knowing Aleksander had begun to walk back to his room. She called him through what she had begun to call the purl, liking the suggestion of something precious that formed around an anomaly; she called and it was not as if she heard his response drifting back. It was something else, a sense she had of him within her mind and her body but also beside her, as present and ephemeral as shadows could be. Their power was there, inextricable, but also their very selves and if she felt satisfaction to be able to find him so, his reaction was a startled joy, that she would seek him and seeking, find him.

## Chapter End Notes

According to Google translate, Zochin is Mongolian for visitor. What there is only one of within I leave to your imagination...

## Chapter 25

“Let me make sure I understand you. You are telling me that the only viable option is for you to cut off your left hand without any anesthesia, have David create a bio-compatible piece of jewelry, most likely a gold bracelet, that I would wear and somehow in a yet-to-be-explained manner absorb into my own flesh, thus allowing me permanent amplification and access to your power,” Alina said. She tried to imagine something calm and serene, a crystalline pool in the depths of a green forest or a sleeping cat along a windowsill as the snow fell without. It didn’t work. She was still so far beyond exasperated she would have needed a Zemeni freighter to cross the ocean to get back there. “I can’t even—have you gone mad, Aleksander? You can’t think I would ever, ever agree to this—”

“It’s not the whole left hand. Just a finger,” Aleksander said.

“Not the thumb,” David clarified. “The pinky will work perfectly well.”

“The pinky will work? The pinky? That’s the reassurance you are offering me?” Alina said. She wished Ivan were present or even better, Togtuun, someone who would have met her eyes and validated her response to what felt like Aleksander’s abrupt departure from sanity, helped along by David. “That’s what you decided to go with?”

“It’s necessary,” Aleksander said as if that would end the conversation, Alina convinced and acquiescent.

“Let’s start there,” Alina replied. “I don’t see your reasoning about why it’s necessary.”

“I told you she would fight this,” Baghra said from the chair she sat in beside the fire, her walking stick leaning against the carved arm of the chair much as she might have rested a battle-axe or blood-stained bayonet. Alina had been startled when Aleksander told her his mother would be joining them, but his explanation, that they needed to hear from the only other Summoner available had seemed sensible enough. It was becoming the last sensible-enough statement he’d made. Baghra, however, seemed far more lucid than the previous time Alina had spoken with her; perhaps leaving the fug of her quarters had allowed her mind to clear. “Either tell her everything or nothing, boy. These half-measures are a waste of time.”

“Nikolai Lantsov is the most credible threat I’ve faced in over a century,” Aleksander said.

“A threat to the monarchy?”

“To the Grisha,” Aleksander replied. “The monarchy has managed to survive coups and usurpation innumerable times. But if Lantsov wishes to take the throne from his current position, he will need to strike a dramatic blow and he cannot risk the Grisha of the Little Palace supporting the Tsar. He will exterminate us and blame us for our own demise, a warning to any Grisha in the outlying regions to go into hiding.”

“You said from his current position,” Alina remarked. “What did you mean?”

“As an outsider, he has been able to amass untold resources. He could, however, have returned to court and worked on building alliances here, a more delicate process that would have allowed him to retain more of the existing aristocratic and administrative hierarchy. Based on what Nina has told me, he means to burn it to the ground. Possible literally, which given the grotesque excesses of the Grand Palace, one can hardly blame him for,” Aleksander said.

David had raised a finger, close enough to his face he might have concealed the gesture by brushing back the hair above his ear but both Alina and Aleksander saw him and Aleksander nodded.

“I believe a tooth would also be effective. And perhaps less off-putting to the Sun Summoner. I could make a ring,” he said.

“Duly noted,” Aleksander said. “Does it help, Alina?”

“No, and you knew it wouldn’t,” she said. “I’m more than willing to agree you have a better handle on the political machinations that go into couping and general governmental overthrows and the like. I understand you’re worried and that you being worried the way you are isn’t usual. I get that the Grisha are in danger and that you are desperate to keep us all safe. It’s your methods I’m not sold on.”

“She’s not sold on getting an amplifier from the strongest Grisha amplifier in recorded history,” Baghra sniffed. It occurred to Alina the statement was the nearest Baghra might ever have come to being a proud mother; the flicker of surprise in Aleksander’s eyes told her she was right.

“It’s more important that I’m the nearest,” Aleksander said.

“For, well, not for the sake of argument, but let’s say, for my edification, what are the other amplifiers you’ve ruled out?” Alina asked.

“The stag and the sea serpent,” Aleksander said. “And the firebird. Even if we had access to the best trackers in Ravka, it would be the rankest folly to go in pursuit of any of them when I am already here. And willing.”

“I’ve gathered it’s quite the thing to capture and harvest an amplifier,” Alina said. Zoya had gone on and on about her own amplifier in what now seemed like the distant past; Ivan had one of his own, almost too-on-the-nose bear claws, which he never spoke of. “But you’re not proposing I try to attack and defeat you—”

“Of course not,” he said. “What has been written states amplifiers are generally won in a battle, but can be offered up without losing their power.”

“It’s all Ilya Morozova lore that you’re relying on, correct?” Alina said.

“He knew a thing or two about amplifiers, girl,” Baghra said, her voice rough, almost barking. She could do with a cup of mulled wine with a dollop of honey, but Alina didn’t feel anyone in the room was willing to take a break for a hot drink. “Skepticism won’t serve you



well when the First Army turns on you and the people of Os Alta storm the gates of the Little Palace with pitchforks and torches.”

“I’m not being skeptical, I’m considering that he may have only seen one aspect of the amplifier. And that there may be other ways to accomplish our goals without Aleksander losing a hand, pinky, or molar,” she said, turning to face Aleksander. “There’s already the purl and think about what happened in the cottage in the woods, you said you didn’t have a name for it but that doesn’t mean there isn’t one—”

“What happened in the woods?” Thankfully, it was David who inquired because Alina could tell by the set of Aleksander’s jaw that he would not have answered his mother.

“Alina was able to heal me when I was very ill. She used her light,” he said.

“But light doesn’t heal,” David said.

“Just so. And yet it did,” Aleksander replied. Baghra glanced at Alina, for the first time ever only curious and possibly even appreciative.

“And when you were...overcome, before we knew about the purl, there was that as well,” Alina said.

“What did she do, Shura?” Baghra asked.

“She called me back, when I was nearly lost in the Shadow, I thought she’d been attacked again,” he said. Alina could hear the echo of the pain he’d been in and the relief when he’d heard her voice; if they’d been alone, she would have gone to him, laid her hand on his neck and pulled him down to her, her eyes open during the kiss and his as well.

“She called you back from merzost,” Baghra said. “Without an amplifier of her own, without handfasting or any of the old bindings through the chants—”

“She only called my name, said she was there,” he replied. “I heard her, madraya, when I should have been deaf to all in the grip of the Shadow, the dark making—”

“Perhaps she’s right,” Baghra said, rising from her chair, taking her stick in her hand.

“Perhaps she doesn’t need your bones to draw on you. But it would be easier.” She paused, looked at David.

“If you speak of this, David Kostyk, you will wish for death the way an orphaned babe cries for its mother’s tit,” she said, making him blanch. “I don’t know, Shura. I don’t know what you should do and you must live with it, whatever you choose, how many more of the children you saved will die if you are wrong, if you’re wrong, the Fold will look like a fête, your Volcra like coy missish maids twittering over flowers and sweetmeats, the meat of your hand hanging in shreds, shrouds, shrouds, Shura—”

“That’s enough,” Aleksander said, walking over to take her by the arm. Baghra’s eyes held such darkness and Alina could suddenly see how Aleksander resembled her, the similar arc of their cheekbones, the way they would lift their chin, the moment they took before letting out

a breath when they were hurt. She wondered briefly what his father had looked like, how often he had stood beside Baghra the way their son did just now, a hand at her arm, but her face lifted up to her lover's like a lily in bloom.

"David, wait here with Alina," Aleksander said. He opened a door Alina had barely noticed, tucked as it was behind or between bookcases, and guided Baghra through what was apparently a secret passageway. Because of course there was also a secret passageway to his quarters he hadn't yet mentioned.

"I thought she would hit me," David said into the quiet. "With her stick."

"She must be ill—"

"I've never known her any different from today," David said. "Maybe she's less fearsome around other people. She's always been like that, sharp and quick, asking questions you can't possibly answer and then almost nonsensical, but not enough to give you the peace of saying to yourself oh, well, she's mad or ill. She usually hit me at the end of one of those rants."

"I don't know what to say, David. I'm sorry," Alina offered.

"It wasn't your doing, but it's nice of you. Nice to hear," he said.

"What do you really think about this amplifier situation? It doesn't feel like your kind of solution," Alina asked.

"It's what the General asked for," David said, but he couldn't keep a slight grimace from his face, somewhere between pain and disgust.

"I've been in your workroom, I bet you already have a dozen ideas and a half-a-dozen prototypes for something less gruesome. And more effective," Alina said.

"I do," he said. "There's a modification to the tracking device I've been working on, that taken in concert with what you and the General call the purl, could, I feel, create a more stable and reliable method for you to each access the other's power, without the need for any injury or maiming. I'm not entirely sure, though, it would help to have some practical exposure to your use of the purl and then there is the matter of what the General said happened in the woods, which doesn't sound like any phenomenon I'm aware of."

"You think this device would be better than an amplifier made of General Kirigan's bones in effectiveness, not just keeping the General from being hurt?" Alina said.

"I do. It lacks the permanence of the amplifier, which I feel the General will object to, on your behalf, not his own," David said. "But otherwise, I feel it offers the same degree of access but with less...organic flux."

"How quickly could we try it out?" She knew Aleksander was impatient, eager to move ahead with the amplifier, ready to take a knife to his own hand, and if David's approach was going to take weeks, it was something Aleksander would reject summarily.

“I could have something for you to try by tonight,” David said. “If I spent the rest of the day finalizing some adjustments and doing a few preliminary trials in the lab.”

“Then go. I’ll tell Alek—the General and don’t worry, he won’t be angry with you for leaving or bringing your device back,” she said. “I’ll make sure of that.”

“You might speak to the Librarian. I think they might know what to make of what happened in the forest or at least, what book to look in,” David said, walking to the usual exit from the General’s quarters, leaving Alina alone in Aleksander’s rooms.

There was a lot to think about. Aleksander’s desperation and his willingness to chop off parts of his body to ensure they were connected, Baghra’s perplexing mix of prescience and madness, the potential of David’s current creation and the larger, possible underutilized potential of David overall, given what she’d picked up from the time she’d spent in his workroom. The mysterious power possessed by Togtuun, whose kefta was unique and whose eyes always promised more than the words the Librarian spoke, and the acceptance of a secret passageway that led directly to the most important and secure location in all Ravka from parts unknown, at least to Alina.

Fortunately, Aleksander had had pastries and tea sent in, though they hadn’t been touched during the discussion. Even better, they were not all the egregiously honey-and-marchpane-sweet concoctions Aleksander preferred; there were some savory tarts with mushrooms and shallots, some airy popovers miraculously rich with butter and cheese, and an ample supply of blini with delicate curls of smoked salmon and fronds of dill. Alina knew that however difficult finding a solution to their current dilemma was, hunger would only make it worse. She arranged a plate for herself, poured out a cup of tea, and settled herself at the end of the sofa, starting with an embarrassingly large bite of popover.

“You’re making good work of that,” Aleksander remarked as he came in from the secret passageway, a smile on his face almost like the ones she remembered from the cottage.

“Don’t think you’re going to persuade me we’re just having breakfast as if we didn’t just talk about harvesting your bones to make me some super-being,” Alina said, dabbing at her mouth with a napkin.

“You are already a super-being, if that’s what you’d like to call it,” he said.

“I sent David to his workroom, he has a device he thinks could work even better than the jewelry you’re proposing, and I thought you and I could do with a private discussion,” she said, gesturing for Aleksander to sit down in the chair across from her spot on the sofa.

“I see,” he said.

“But do you?” she said. “It feels to me like you’ve fixed in your mind the only course of action, without any input from anyone else, and that now I’ve got to mount an argument as if I’m an advocate in front of a judge. Perhaps I would have come to agree with you about the amplifier, if we’d had a real conversation about it, instead of you presenting it as a done deal, you making a noble sacrifice but also making me into a tool—”

“I would give you all my power and take nothing from you,” Aleksander protested, his words clipped.

“I don’t want that,” Alina said. “And I don’t want you to be a martyr, for the Grisha or for me. I understand, I’m asking a lot of you, the idea that we could work together as a team, because you haven’t had anyone who’s your peer in terms of your power and I know I’m young and ill-educated, a nobody from nowhere, but—”

“But nothing,” he interrupted, cutting her off. “You’re right. Except for the nobody part.”

“You’re not going to say anything in defense of Keramzin?” Alina said, trying to muster some sass when in truth, he’d taken the wind out of her sails; she’d been prepared to argue for at least another fifteen minutes or the duration of several more pastries’ consumption and the whole pot of tea.

“No, that place is a pathetic shithole, if you’ll pardon my language,” Aleksander said. “The Duke meant well, but he was outmatched by a newborn duckling when it came to, well, everything—estate management, the politics of the court, even trimming his whiskers—”

“He had a decent library,” Alina said.

“Togtuun felt bad for him. They sent the old editions that the Little Palace was getting rid of to him,” Aleksander said. “In a way, Togtuun has been educating you for your whole life.”

“I notice they weren’t invited today,” Alina said. “Because you know what they’d have said. That the amplifier was both unnecessary and shockingly grotesque, some sort of penance you felt compelled to perform, a debt you meant to entangle me in which would only have given us endless angst as we tried to resolve the balance between us—”

“Peace, Alya, enough,” Aleksander exclaimed, holding up his hands in the universal gesture of surrender. To imagine one of those beautifully made hands maimed, incomplete, scar tissue wadded up or making the whole into a claw—it was a travesty and she almost wanted to hit him for suggesting it. “It was ill-conceived and wasteful and if David’s device is ineffective, we may yet need to revisit the amplifier and how we might manage it so that you can accept it but until then, we may put it aside, the vitriol and the condemnation. I assure you, Baghra has provided that in ample measure, however mad she may be.”

“However mad is she?” Alina asked. “She was a lot like today when I went to see her, given to odd fancies and odder phrases and I don’t understand how she got that way. How bad it really is.”

“She has refused to use her own power for so long, the darkness has turned upon her, the Cut severing ties between logic and speech, releasing any curb she might have held upon her feelings,” he said. “She has tolerated my plans, the Little Palace and the Second Army, but she hasn’t liked them, has told me they are too much and not enough, much as I am—”

“You are not,” Alina said.

“You haven’t known me as long as she has,” he said.

“It doesn’t matter how long it’s been if she’s never seen you properly,” Alina said. “Her perception of you isn’t somehow the most accurate because of how long she’s known you or the fact that she gave birth to you—there are a number of people here right now who see your strengths for what they are and I dare you to tell me that both Ivan and Togtuun are both just being kind.”

“That I would never do,” he said, his delight in her evident, not least in the way he reached for a glossy pastry adorned with candied violets.

“You don’t want that one,” she said, making him stop.

“No?”

“No. You want the one with the whipped cream and the caramel custard but you’re afraid to make a mess,” she said. She got up and put the cake on a plate, then handed it to him. “Take what you want, Sashenka. I’ll help you clean up after if you need me.”

“You will?” he said, in a tone that could have been salacious if it weren’t so fond, so unused to being offered help, so young and so often left alone. She swiped a little of the whipped cream and tasted it, knowing the hint of ginger and canella would be more intense on his lips if she kissed him after he’d taken a bite, the sweetness all his; she knew he wouldn’t smile when she moved to wipe the cream from his beard, but would sit very still and watch her the whole time.

“Yes,” she said and saw that it was not quite enough. “Gladly,” she added, “it would be my pleasure.”

“All right,” he answered and took an enormous bite of the cake, his eyes momentarily closed in what must be the bliss of sugar and butter, then looked at her with an eager warmth. “Then it will be.”

And it was, so much so that it was nearly a relief when David rapped on the door far earlier than they’d expected, but not so early that any of the whipped cream was left anywhere at all, long enough for Alina to have developed her own taste for caramel and spice, her own memory of Aleksander’s hands, whole and perfect, cupping her cheeks, holding her with utter gentleness and a wonderful possession, waiting until she said *give me more*.

## Chapter 26

“He’s no Saint, Nikolai, but I didn’t think it would come to this,” Aleksander said, absently touching the ring Alina had slipped onto his finger under David’s scrutiny, reciting the chant that keyed the ring to Aleksander’s power as Aleksander had done with her. It was a simple platinum band, without any gems, but delicately and elaborated chased with the design David averred matched their summoning; the explanation had been so elaborate Aleksander shook his head and told David to write it up, in cipher, and give it to Togtuun. It was a neat solution that satisfied David while removing him from Aleksander’s private chambers. Alina had to give David credit though, because the ring was very beautiful, one she might have chosen herself if she’d been asked to and it suited Aleksander’s slender hand well, with the elegance of the silver raptor ring he wore to reveal young Grisha without any of its involuted malevolence.

“How well do you know him?” Alina asked.

Her own ring felt both heavy and light. She had dropped her gaze from Aleksander’s face as he slid it on, his voice careful, a little rough as he uttered the words David had prepared. She knew they were both thinking how like a wedding it was and how they had been driven to it by the prospect of being betrayed and attacked instead of coming together in joyous affection. Whatever fondness Aleksander might ever have had for the young prince could not withstand the wrath engendered by being forced to this moment.

Nikolai, whatever else he had been, had been a fool long enough to bring them to this point and she saw Aleksander would never forgive the prince for it. Looking at Aleksander’s face, she couldn’t find any scrap of pity for Nikolai within herself.

“I’ve known him since he was born. I saw him in his swaddling clothes, when he was held at the font of Sankt Egmond. He peed all over the Apparat,” Aleksander said. “I liked him then.”

“Sankt Egmond? That’s an unusual choice, for a prince of Ravka, isn’t it?” Alina said.

“His mother wanted it. They revere him in Fjerda too, as Sēnj Egmond,” Aleksander said.

“And the patron saint of architects suggested a role for him, since he was never supposed to become Tsar. It seemed to fit him as he grew. He was quite creative, brighter than his brother by far.”

“Why were you so surprised that he would seek the throne?”

“He never seemed to want power for itself,” Aleksander said. He drew his thumb along his jaw, a tell she’d seen before when they played shatranj, when he was facing the fact he’d played an unsuccessful gambit. “He has a sharp wit and he never hesitated to use it to strike out at any member of Court he deemed an idiot. Which meant he had endless opportunities. He didn’t make many friends among the nobles and the degree of, shall we say, affection he was held in by their wives didn’t help.”

“That’s not all, though,” Alina said.

“To take the throne, that he would want that doesn’t shock me,” Aleksander said. “That he would climb upon the corpses of the Grisha to get there does. He made it clear he saw the Grisha as unfairly persecuted and under-appreciated. He told me once that when his brother ascended to the throne, he intended to speak for the Grisha, to become the patron of the Little Palace.”

“I see,” she said.

“What do you see, Alya?” he asked. “It’s never what I expect.”

“You trusted him, as much as you trust any *otkazat’sya*, any noble,” Alina said. “You believed you might build something more for the Grisha with a man like Nikolai at your side, a comrade. You thought you’d learned better, all these years, decades—”

“Centuries,” he put in.

“Centuries, you thought you would know, recognize when someone was good, kind. Weak, strong, honest. Worthy,” she said. “And now he’s destroyed that and no matter what he might be trying to do for Ravka, it won’t make a difference, because he’s willing to turn on his countrymen, to purposefully trample the vulnerable to achieve his own goals. You’d never do that to a Grisha, no matter how little you liked them.”

“No, I wouldn’t,” he said.

“But you can’t, I don’t know, castigate yourself over it. This. Nikolai turning out to be an animate pile of stinking, pox-ridden Volcra-shit. You can’t let yourself get all mired in self-loathing and self-reproach and basically all Baghra’s messed up guilt and scolding,” Alina said, moving over to where Aleksander sat, taking his hand in both of hers. “You didn’t make a mistake, Sasha. Nikolai did and by all the Saints, he’s going to regret it.”

“He is?” Aleksander said.

“What do you think I’ve been doing in the Library all those hours with Togtuun? We don’t just sit around and talk about the Princess and the Barbarian or whether the best manuscript glue really comes from Fjerdan ice-horse hooves. They’re pretty firm on that point, I stopped arguing,” Alina said. “And then we started, if you’ll pardon the expression, getting shit done. Light isn’t just pretty and I think you know what Togtuun is capable of—”

“Even I would not presume on that score,” Aleksander said and then his dark eyes were lit with something like a candle’s flame and something like a star’s. Alina felt the rising of his power through the ring, through the purl, and in his soft exhalation. “You don’t know what it does, to hear you speak so—”

“Tell me, show me, Sashenka,” she interrupted. Before her next heartbeat, she was in his arms, his hands on her without any pretense to restraint and his mouth was on hers, passion replacing any tender finesse, his overwhelming hunger for her direct, as focused as the Cut, as enveloping as a midwinter night. He kissed her again and again, ferocious, adoring,

confident. Finally unconcerned that he might go too far, take too much, trusting her as his equal, the Summoner who would spell him if he paused in battle, the woman who would hold him, cherish him, let him cry out her name or just his animal pleasure and find peace, his face pressed against her throat.



# Chapter 27

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Morning,” Nina Zenik, of whom Alina knew primarily that, her name, called out from the corner of the kitchen Alina was wont to go to when she was in search of some morsel to tide her over until the next meal, when she didn’t want to call for a tray and inconvenience any of the maids or simply wanted to feel like an ordinary Grisha, as if that were at all possible, when she was too late or too early to idle in the dining room or to make much of a bother in the main workspace of the kitchen itself. “I lost track of just how long it’s been since I’ve been here. Or had one of Yevanija’s pastries—it’s not a waffle, but it’s damn close and I’m being rude, would you like some?” Nina beckoned Alina to join her with a hand holding a golden jam-filled puff, her remarks slightly muffled by the bite she’d taken and powdered sugar lining her upper lip like a new style affected by the ladies of the Tsaritsa’s court. Alina had expected to be alone, but it seemed a priceless opportunity was presenting itself—and she also liked those pastries. The currant jam was never too sweet, a hazard among pastry chefs use to catering to Aleksander’s palate.

“Yes, if you’ve enough to spare,” Alina said, to be polite. Nina had a plate heaped with doughnuts, tarts, biscuits and Yevanija’s specialty, as well as a pot of tea, a jug of milk, the honey-pot, and a little dish of salted, spiced nuts which must be intended to add a bit of savory.

“There’s plenty and I think you’ll find I don’t stand on ceremony, at least not when I don’t have to. When I’m home,” Nina said, topping up her mug from the teapot and fixing Alina with a gimlet stare. “Though maybe I shouldn’t presume with the Sun Summoner. Exalted company and all.”

“I’m hardly exalted company, I was a Shu orphan from Keramzin for a lot longer than I’ve been Grisha,” Alina said. “I came to the Little Palace from the First Army—I’m sure you could find someone here to tell you what I was like when I arrived here.”

“I already have,” Nina said brightly but with an edge. “Wouldn’t be much of a spy if I hadn’t, no?”

“Well, you brought a Fjerdan mercenary who’d evidently captured you first into the most protected sanctuary of the Grisha if what I’ve gleaned is accurate, but I’m not really in a position to evaluate your prowess as a spy,” Alina said. She took a bite of an iced lemon biscuit as punctuation, because a custard tart or one of Yevanija’s puffs might prove too messy to underscore her point. Nina gave her a smile, one that held recognition if no real trust. Alina wasn’t offended; she didn’t trust Nina either. She’d had to ask Ivan a series of oblique questions to discover that Helvar had initially been Nina’s captor and then they’d had a more pointed discussion about how and when to reveal the intelligence to Aleksander.

“I see there’s some heat along with illumination in your Light,” Nina said. Alina schooled her face to a passivity Togtuun would have applauded, unable to keep from remembering

Aleksander's embrace, how warm his bare skin had been under her hands, the look in his eyes when she had asked him to stay and he'd begged her pardon for going anyway, the ache of his departure slight compared to the need he'd had to be wanted beyond reason.

"Yes," Alina replied. "I'm working with Master Botkin and the Librarian on refining my technique."

"I'm glad. The General needs someone who can protect him. And you're a wise woman to avoid Dame Baghra," Nina said. She was steadily making her way through the pastries and dispatched each bite with the enthusiastic zest that made it clear she was familiar with hunger, with appetites long unsatisfied. She wasn't a woman to waste opportunity, which might be why Helvar was sitting in the Zochin suite, awaiting Nina's return.

"I don't avoid Dame Baghra. We've reached a sort of *détente*," Alina said.

"*Ifreann naofa*, how're they training the First Army now? A *détente* with Dame Baghra?" Nina exclaimed. Alina didn't understand the expletive, only that it clearly was one and one Nina must have picked up fairly far away, since Alina had never heard anything like it, not even crossing the Fold.

"I've found my educational experience is best described as unique," Alina said. "I'm more concerned about what you haven't already told us about Prince Nikolai. And Mr. Helvar."

"How do you know I've held anything back?" Nina asked.

"Because I would have and I've only the most rudimentary understanding of espionage, though I have a fairly decent shatranj game," Alina said. "Because of how Ivan looked at you, not like he wanted to put a dagger through you but not like he'd do the Ivan equivalent of opening his arms to you for a big hug. He's worried—about you and for you. General Kirigan is confident enough it wouldn't be dangerous, whatever you haven't said yet, but if you don't tell me and David discovers something through Mr. Helvar's device or whatever contraption he may tuck into some impenetrable recess of the Zochin suite, I wouldn't count on the General's long-standing affection for you providing you cover. Miss Nazyalensky was sent away and the threat she posed was pretty minimal in comparison to what you might do. Or cause or allow."

"You think I should tell you," Nina said. It could have been a question but it wasn't and not because Nina had started in on some confection of pastila, marchpane, and rosewater syrup Alina herself could never have choked down.

"It's one option," Alina said. "The safer choice is Togtuun, because they've got a much better sense of all the players and intrigues."

"No one really understands the Librarian's power," Nina said.

"No, they don't," Alina replied. "I'm not sure General Kirigan even knows, to be honest."

"He wouldn't like you saying that," Nina remarked.

“Maybe not, but I’ve said plenty he doesn’t always like. That’s what it means to have a Sun Summoner,” Alina said. “I expect I’ll say plenty more he doesn’t approve of.”

“Zoya must have loathed you. Positively, pestilentially loathed,” Nina said, grinning and leaning back in her chair. Some light caught her auburn hair and Alina noticed how elaborately and unusually braided it was, not one hair out of place though her cuffs were sloppy and the scarlet ribbon at her neck askew. Alina had seen braids like that, but only in the Library, in an Fjerdan manuscript that documented the customs of the far Northern fylki. It seemed Matthias Helvar was good with his hands.

“How’d you know?”

“Because I like you. And because she couldn’t stand to be eclipsed, but what else can a tempest be in comparison to the sun? She has to stop to take a breath occasionally and you can just keep shining,” Nina said.

“I don’t think it’s that simple,” Alina said.

“Of course not. Nothing ever is except that sometimes that’s exactly what something is. Simple. Defined,” Nina said. “Every once in a while, there are no shades of grey to worry about. Something is right or wrong.”

“Is that how it is with you and Mr. Helvar?” Alina asked.

“I see why he cares so much for you, General Kirigan,” Nina replied, side-stepping Alina’s question. “It’s wrong that Nikolai Lantsov wants to use the General and the Grisha to protect himself while he tries to overthrow the Tsar.”

“Overthrowing the Tsar isn’t wrong?” Alina asked.

“You served in the First Army, didn’t you? You’ve been to court?” Nina shrugged. “Call me a radical, but I’m not convinced a monarchy is the optimal form of government, regardless of who’s the head, whether they spend all their time out hunting at country estates or negotiating a better price for kaffe and printer’s ink with the merchants of Ketterdam.”

Alina thought of the bookshop she’d visited with Aleksander when they’d been Tailored by Genya, the pamphlets and treatises she’d leafed through. It was easy enough to envision Nina arguing with a collection of writers and free-thinkers, tossing off a riposte or a barb, nodding in enthusiastic agreement, her hands gesturing as she spoke. The question of proper governance wasn’t one Alina had considered before, as she hadn’t considered the sky being blue or the sharpness of the winter winds coming down from Tsibeya, but she admitted it was an interesting one and one where her perspective and Nina’s might be in concert while no other Grisha had much of an opinion or simply felt that General Kirigan should replace the Tsar and then all would be right in the world. It wouldn’t be that easy, not even if Aleksander were well-suited to becoming a benevolent tyrant, a role Alina felt fairly sure would fit him as ill as Master Botkin would find the Tsaritsa’s mauve Istamere whalebone stays, that laced from armpit to knee-cap.

“However much good you think it might do the country for the Lantsovs to be removed from the throne or even the throne from the throne room, Prince Nikolai can’t be allowed to succeed,” Alina said.

“You’ll get no argument from me on that score,” Nina replied. “But he’s devious and for Saints’ sake, I’m not sure how to stop him. I’m usually good at that part, out-maneuvering otkazat’sya.”

“Maybe it’s not about stopping him,” Alina said. Nina, though she gave Alina a stare equal parts incredulous and confused, did not interrupt. “Maybe it’s about helping him along, removing any barriers to his self-destruction. He may be devious, but he also thought it was a good idea to blab out his entire plan to Mr. Helvar in a tavern. And I’ve yet to hear of a member of the royal house who hasn’t massively overestimated their own abilities.”

“You make an interesting point,” Nina said. “I’m not sure how easily you’ll get the General or Ivan, Sankta Maradi’s blessed embroidered sash, Ivan to consider it, but it reminds me of a stratagem Master Botkin would suggest to defeat a powerful opponent, with minimal cost to your own resources.”

“I’m flattered,” Alina replied.

“You should never be flattered by the truth,” Nina replied.

“That doesn’t sound like something you would say,” Alina remarked.

“It’s not. I’m quoting Matthias. Speaking of whom, I should return to my quarters. He’s basically sequestered there and he’s not one for taking his ease,” Nina said.

“He does seem like he’d rather be, I don’t know, chopping ice,” Alina said.

“He probably would.”

“Is there anything that could safely occupy him? Ivan won’t want him going to the training rooms or discovering anything more about the Little Palace—”

“Can you have the Librarian send the entire Princess and the Barbarian series? He doesn’t believe it actually exists,” Nina said. “I can’t wait to see his face when he finds out he was wrong. And then when he reads that scene in the third book—”

“The bathtub one? Or the one when she overhears him singing the song of the three doves?” Alina asked.

“Oh, I meant the bathtub,” Nina said, her lips curving in a sly smile. “I’ll bet he cries over the song of the doves.”

“Everyone does,” Alina said.

“Everyone? Even General Kirigan?” Nina repeated.

“He’s not made of stone,” Alina said. “But I’m not sure he’d want it, let’s say, bandied about —”

“Who would believe me if I told them?” Nina laughed. “Only Matthias and no one here will believe him.”

“Nina knows more than you think she does,” Alina said. The sfera she’d cast hung in the air between them, glittering instead of glowing, at Aleksander’s instruction. Despite the sharpness of the light, his face was still illuminated gently and the silver raptor ring on his finger gleamed instead of glinted as he deployed shadows sleek as eel-skin. They were in his private training room, which lent itself to sparring both physically and verbally. She could have managed the conversation over a game of shatranj, but he’d been coming along well and she hated to make him question his use of the crystal gambit.

“She’ll find she’s late to the party if she tries to get any traction out of the revelation about me tearing up when the Barbarian sings the lullaby to the Princess,” Aleksander said.

“If you let the kitchen stop serving herring so often, there’d be more for the Grisha to talk about over meals,” Alina said, making her sfera dodge his Summoned darkness. “But that’s not what I meant—”

“No? There’s more you disclosed in your tête-a-tête? Bend your wrist just a little more and there, there you have it, *umnaya*,” he said, focused more on the practice than the conversation, more on praising her than finding fault.

“It’s what she knows, not what I told her. It’s something about Nikolai,” Alina said. “And maybe Helvar.”

“They’re lovers,” Aleksander said. Alina paused, startled, just managing to keep her sfera from clumping together into an unwieldy orb and Aleksander gave her a wry smile. “Nina and the Fjerdan. She wouldn’t risk an assignation with someone in line to the throne—”

“That’s a greater risk than a drüskelle?”

“Helvar’s isolated himself from his countrymen by letting her live and not returning her to Fjerda to stand trial,” Aleksander said. “She’s brought him here and Ivan won’t let him do anything, go anywhere, not even to curry the geldings in the stable or muck out the stalls. He’s thrown in his lot with the Grisha he is supposed to want to annihilate rather than a well-connected but impetuous prince. Helvar is a far lesser risk than Nikolai,” Aleksander explained. “She is loyal, our Nina, and she’s never failed me before, so I will give her some time.”

“Time to decide what to tell you?”

“To give me the intelligence I need, Alya. This is not the First Army, we don’t require total obedience,” Aleksander said. “If we have trained her well, Nina will tell me everything I require and will have to ability to make that assessment herself. She will not be guided by

rules, but by principles. That is how Grisha act—we must, because the rules Ravka creates would bind or destroy us whenever the otkazat'sya wish them to.”

“That’s why Ivan didn’t just kill Matthias Helvar on sight,” Alina said.

“Oh, I’m not sure about that,” Aleksander said. “Ivan’s always had a sweet spot for Nina, ever since she was a little girl first come to the Little Palace.”

Alina thought about what it must have been like to be a young child and have Ivan, solemn and occasionally murderous, as a protector, though Ivan himself would have been younger, a stripling whose voice hadn’t yet broken. To have someone devoted to your well-being, making sure you got your fair share of the dinner, someone who’d run after you if you wandered away, who’d see through your attempt at showing a brave face and offer whatever he could for comfort—a bony shoulder, a filched treat, a pebble that looked remarkably like a foxhound. She thought of how blithely Mal had always walked away from her. How Aleksander hadn’t even had that, only friends who’d turned on him, even if they’d had some cause. Ivan, she felt sure, would have let himself be ripped limb from limb rather than let any harm come to someone he held dear.

“He makes a good friend,” she said. “I’m still not impressed with his sense of humor, but I guess you can’t have everything.”

“You can,” Aleksander said, suddenly closer than he had been, his shadows drawn around them with the warmth of a sable cloak. The mood between them had shifted. She would have thought he intended to seduce her except that he was so intensely earnest. And because he couldn’t seduce a woman who already loved him, though it seemed she hadn’t yet convinced him on that point. “You shall—”

“I don’t need everything,” she said. “You don’t have to promise me the moon and the stars and a sailing ship ready to travel the world. You’re enough, at least—”

“At least?”

“At least if you’ll agree to let me read the Princess and the Barbarian books out loud to you,” she said. “I want to see for myself if you really tear up, Sasha. And if you do—”

“I will,” he said. He rested a hand at her waist but the shadow around them changed not at all, such was his control.

“Then I want to wipe them away myself,” she said.

“I’d rather you kissed it better,” he said. “I’d like to find out what my tears taste like on your lips.”

“You prefer sweets, Sashenka,” she said, leaning into him so her breasts pressed against his chest, half of her sfera winking out when his grasp on her tightened and he caught his breath. The remaining light grew richer, closer to gold where it touched his cheekbones, the bridge of his nose, the working of his throat swallowing against the surge of desire between them, the tenderness in her gaze.

“It won’t take merzost to change the salt to sweet,” he said. “It only takes you, *milaya*.”

## Chapter End Notes

Nina uses an Irish Gaelic (Wandering Isle) expletive as I imagine she has a wide range of obscenities picked up from around the world.

## Chapter 28

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Hear me out—” Alina began, stopped by Aleksander taking up the hand she’d perhaps unwisely been gesturing expansively with as a consequence of the glass of medovudkha he’d shared with her over-generously as it turned out. She could hardly bring herself to regret it, recalling the tender look in his eyes as she’d put her lips where his had been and then the heat that flared when she’d licked the last drops from her bottom lip. She wasn’t an accomplished coquette by a long shot, but she made an effort when they were alone to treat him as any man might be by his sweetheart, as she supposed he’d hardly ever been able to enjoy such attention as General Kirigan; his own people regarded him with respect and a loyal affection and the nobles of the Tsar’s court who would flirt or entice would see him as a novelty or political operator.

“You don’t need to ask me to listen to you,” he said.

“But I do,” she said. “Because of exactly this, how you stop me to tell me I don’t need to beg your permission or ask and I think you are partly hoping I’ll lose my train of thought and mostly hoping I’ll let you steal a kiss, as if you need to steal anything that I’d most happily give you—”

“You would? Most happily? You wouldn’t begrudge me or suffer my attentions with the patience of a Sankta?” he said, using his grasp on her hand to bring them closer together and it didn’t make any sense that his dark eyes reminded her of the golden liquor she’d swallowed so eagerly but something of it must have shown in her face, because he was smiling now, that secret smile he saved for her, that said she was cherished and also that he didn’t understand why she loved him in return and to the exact same degree as he loved her but that he would let her try to explain again. And again.

“You know I would and how readily and now I believe you’re fishing,” she said. “But back to the point I wanted to make about a century ago—”

“I don’t think it was so long, *milaya*,” he interjected, shifting so she was nearly in his lap but still far enough away there was some way to call it a conversation and not an assignation, a tryst well on its way to a tumble.

“You have no sense of time in the boudoir,” she retorted. “Ivan said so. He said you only count the seconds on the battlefield, in combat or negotiations—”

“We are not negotiating, then?”

“No, I am trying to have a conversation and you are amusing yourself by interrupting me,” she said. It was interesting that he had not chosen to inquire about her discussions with Ivan and their general content and tenor, but perhaps he didn’t want to at all encourage her to think of Ivan in conjunction with Aleksander’s presence in her most private chambers.



“You’ve told me more than once I am too serious, Alya,” he said but he leaned back a little and shrugged.

“I know, I just—I think you should let me say what I was going to say and then you can argue with me about that and not whether or when I said it,” Alina said.

“Please do,” he said and then looked at her expectantly, the very picture of earnest listening, so nearly convincing she was almost tempted to kiss him instead of speaking.

“We could leave. Ravka. For good. Make a new start in Novyi Zem or one of the colonies or one of those islands that are supposed to be beyond Zem,” she said. “I’m sure they exist, the stories about them are too detailed to be completely made up and they’re the kind of details no one would actually make up—”

“Run away?” he said.

“No, we wouldn’t be running away,” she replied. “We’d be making our own choice, writing our own narrative. All this,” she gestured with one hand to indicate the Little Palace and the Second Army, the Tsar and the Fold and the prospect of Nikolai’s betrayal, “we could leave this behind. We could stop being saviors and only be people—”

“We would still be Grisha, still Summoners,” he said.

“Of course, but maybe it wouldn’t have to define every aspect of our lives,” she said. “Maybe you could be Sasha and I could be Alina and we wouldn’t have to carry the weight of the world on our shoulders. We could change our names if you want, I think I’d make a passable Jeska or Eirin.”

“It would be a long voyage,” Aleksander said. Was he warning her or warming to the idea? “And we could not bring great wealth from Ravka without attracting notice, we would not live in a palace—”

“I’m used to living very simply,” Alina said.

“We would have to keep secrets, we couldn’t speak openly about where we’d come from, who we were. I would be the only one you could ever talk to of your life, your griefs,” he said.

“Hardly anyone else understands me anyway, it would be no great loss,” Alina replied.

“We would have to learn a new language, we couldn’t speak Ravkan, not even when we were alone,” he said.

“Everyone says Ravkan is the hardest tongue to become fluent in. That what they speak in Novyi Zem is so easy a child will pick it up in a day,” Alina said.

“We would leave everyone else behind, not only our enemies, but our friends. The students who depend on us. The Grisha who have not yet been tested, who would be at the mercy of Nikolai and his pledge. Genya, David. Ivan. Your old friend Malyen, you could not even leave him a letter,” Aleksander said.

“I know,” Alina said. “It would be a sacrifice. We would have regrets and perhaps they would hate us—”

“Envy us or wish us well, it wouldn’t matter,” Aleksander said.

“How could it not matter?” Alina said.

“Because we would never do it,” Aleksander replied, smiling at her. Not sadly and not superior, just as if she’d walked into the room and he was glad to see her. “You would never do it, it’s only worth the words, the daydream of the taste of the salt spray on our lips, a lantern hung in the front window of a small cottage, a visit to the theater, the cheap seats in the back worth every cent.”

“First you said we would never and then just that I would never do it,” Alina pointed out. “You would?”

“I couldn’t,” he said. “You wouldn’t, won’t, and I wouldn’t ever try to persuade you. I couldn’t. You’re not made that way and even if I am or could be, I could not go without you and I will not see you altered, coerced into anything other than yourself.”

Alina frowned and felt it on her face. Aleksander laughed very softly, but he did not drop a kiss on the tip of her nose or chuck her under the chin as if she were very sweet and very silly.

“It’s a pretty daydream and I like it very much, *milaya*,” he said. “I thank you for sharing it with me, for letting me know you would imagine us so, a whole world you’ve given me to return to when this one is overwhelming. Unrelenting. It’s a comfort to be able to imagine something like that, even if it’s never to be more than that.”

“Never?” Alina repeated.

“We can see our way to something better I think, now that we’ve found each other,” he said. “A future with all the joy you gave us, that we can share with our Grisha, a future with honor and memory.”

“I don’t rate honor that highly,” she said.

“You’re a poor liar,” he replied. “Though I wonder—are you trying to lie to me or yourself?”

“I don’t,” she insisted and now he took her in his arms completely, grazed her cheek with his lips and the tickle of his beard, then whispered in her ear.

“You call it something else then, but it all comes to the same thing,” he said. “How could it be otherwise when you Summon the Sun? Don’t be so quick to deny it, for I need it in you and I have done these many, many years.”

“Sometimes, I wish we were back in the woods, and no one knew where we were,” she confessed. “Not the part where you were so badly hurt, but the rest. The world seemed so far away then and our problems were so much simpler. Enough wood for the fire, enough grass for Opasnost to graze.”

"I know, *moya dusha*, I know," he said. She heard in his voice how he missed it too, how he did not judge her for it, nor would he mock her for her idealization of that time. At least, not very much. "I do think you're conveniently forgetting how monotonous you found the lentils."

"I didn't know there'd be so much herring," she said. "I thought you were exaggerating that part."

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Why?" Alina was not sure he would even hear the word but of course he did.

"Because we cannot just run away together, no matter how much we might long to," he said. "There is no where we might go where we would not still also be here, though I wish it were otherwise, not so much for myself as for you—"

"Not about the herring then?" she said because she couldn't bear the anguish that had altered the timbre of his voice. If they could be escape, she could at least give him respite, just as he gave her refuge. It worked; he laughed.

"No. On that score, I have no regrets," he said. He gave her a squeeze that had more fond affection in it than lust.

"I'll marry you the next time you ask," she said, apropos of nothing and everything all at once. She could tell she hadn't exactly startled him, but he hadn't expected her to say it.

"And if I were to ask you now?"

"Then now would be the next time and on that score, you shouldn't have any questions," she said. "Are you asking me now?"

There was a long silence, a long stillness between them, and she wished she could see his dark eyes but she wouldn't move away even the space it would take to face him.

"I'm always asking you, Alina," he said, finding some impossible way to hold her even more closely. "I'll always be asking you."

His kiss tasted of the honey that made the liquor, the rich, heady sweetness distilled of pleasure and admiration into an unbreakable promise, an insatiable desire, the vast, welcoming peace of recognition. Another night, she would want more from his touch, another night she would cry her need for him aloud, but now, this was enough, this first kiss of their marriage, anticipated but not too early, nor yet too late. When he drew back, he looked dazed, as if he'd drunk a full flagon of medovudkha in one swallow, but Alina felt a perfect clarity. She took his face in her hands and let him see it in her own expression, her cheeks flushed, the braid she'd woven coming loose from his caress. He leaned so his forehead touched hers, closed his eyes, and took a deep breath before his parted lips took the shape of the word *Beloved*. She would undertake whatever words and rituals were deemed necessary, she'd even wear that ludicrous, opulent gold veil, but none of it was necessary to

the truth of their hearts: they were married and when he opened his eyes, he would only and always see his wife.

He gave her his title, Lady Kirigana, but not his name.

He gave her his ring, but it was gold, not silver; a plait, not a claw.

He gave her his vow, but not his claim, his eyes full of tears he would not shed.

The Apparatus was there, his gaze steely, his voice steady raised in chant.

Togtuun was there, standing at Alina's side veiled in flocked chestnut silk, and David Kostyk stood at Aleksander's, his cuffs singed, two witnesses chosen for their ability to keep secrets and tell the truth, whose loyalty could never be breached and who could not be harmed by having been present.

When she learned of it, Genya smiled. Fedyor clapped his hands. Ivan shrugged, leaned back and crossed his legs at the ankle.

When she learned of it, Nina laughed and handed over a coin fished warm from her bodice to Matthias, who blushed and took it.

When she learned of it, Baghra prayed. The room grew dark with shadows like velvet, like the smoke rising from a battlefield; when the shadows cleared, her face was unlined but her hair was still grey, the grey of silver in the crucible, not iron in the forge.

When he learned of it, Prince Nikolai flung his scarlet cape over his shoulder, bowed and kissed Alina's hand, the greeting offered to an ambassador's well-born bride, a gallantry Alina accepted. He needed to think she believed his lie, so she nodded her head and thanked him before she took drew back her hand and laid it on Aleksander's forearm.

"General Kirigan, you are a lucky man," Prince Nikolai said, his face bright and open as if he would never have thought of a coup, of making the man across from him the scapegoat, his bride made a widow before a year was out.

"I must be," Aleksander answered. "Indeed, I must be."

## Chapter End Notes

Jeska is an early form of Jessica, one version of the translation of the name Iscah from a Bible extant around the time Shakespeare was writing *The Merchant of Venice* and used

Jessica. Eirin is Welsh for "plum" which is was Mei means in Chinese. I thought it would be fun to put a little Jessie Mei Li Easter egg in this chapter for you!

## Chapter 29

It came to Alina, suddenly, the way a cup overfilled overflowed, that everything she knew about merzost was wrong. It followed, with the subtlety of sugar stirred into tea, that everything Aleksander believed about merzost was wrong. Between the two of them, her studies and his experience, they encompassed virtually the entirety of the body of knowledge on merzost. The realization was so daunting, so dazzling, that she couldn't help speaking aloud.

"Everything we know about merzost is wrong."

Her voice was pitched quietly for the Library, but it seemed to ring in the space. She was sure to disturb anyone who might be reading or walking through the stacks. As it was, there was only Togtuun at their desk who looked quite the farthest thing from disturbed. They rose, their chestnut brown kefta unbuttoned at the throat, revealing a necklet of enameled links in a style Alina had never seen at court, among the Grisha or even on the otkazat'sya in Os Alta.

"I shouldn't say it took you long enough, when you have gotten further faster than anyone before you," Togtuun remarked. They sat down across from Alina, resting a slender hand on the table top; Alina was convinced that beneath their kefta, Togtuun had crossed their legs with the sly grace of a courtier. There was nothing avid in their gaze, but some warmth was there that did not call its power from light or pressure.

"But you'd like to," Alina replied.

"I haven't been impatient as much as hopeful," Togtuun said.

"You've been a little impatient I think," Alina said. It was a relief that Togtuun could be so, when Alina would have said their chief attribute was a certain unbreachable remoteness.

"Perhaps a little," Togtuun said. "Perhaps far too much, but there have been too many interruptions, too many difficulties that you have had to deal with, and the bond between you and the Shadow Summoner has been...unanticipated."

"You didn't think we'd fall in love," Alina said, when it was clear that Togtuun would not offer an explanation without prompting. It startled her to hear the words she'd chosen instead of either other constructions she might have said, that she'd fallen in love with Aleksander or he with her, though she wouldn't speak of it to him over their blessedly herring-less dinner; it would unsettle him now as it wouldn't in a decade, when he would smile, curious, or in a century, when he would grin over it.

"Not so easily. So completely," Togtuun said. "I suppose that time you spent alone in the woods was an idyll, a recalibration."

"Both of us nearly died, several times," Alina said. "It wasn't a romantic tryst with moonlight and loads of silk cushions and wine flagons with platters of grapes heaped about everywhere. It was freezing and there were so many lentils, it beggared belief."

“How disappointed General Kirigan will be,” Togtuun said.

“To hear me speak the truth? He’d never be disappointed by that,” Alina replied.

“To have missed your description of a perfect tryst,” Togtuun said. “He would never have guessed you felt so strongly about grapes.”

“I thought the grapes were part of the standard Grisha seduction,” Alina said, seeing Mal’s face as he tossed her a few after his evening with Zoya. Decadence hadn’t suited him and she’d had no appetite then, but she remembered the scene so vividly, she had to pity her former self.

“You were wrong about that as well,” Togtuun said. “But that doesn’t matter.”

“And merzost does,” Alina said, as she was supposed to. It could be this way with Togtuun, a lesson that became a dance, a debate that became a puzzle, an embroidery, Togtuun’s gifts those of a Durast and an Alkemi, with a quality all their own, a quicksilver manipulation of thought instead of particulate energy or matter. Alina couldn’t guess when a conversation would proceed in this fashion with the Librarian, but she’d learned to be watchful and ready; she’d learned that Togtuun would not scold her if she made a misstep or birch her if she fumbled, but their praise was nothing like Aleksander’s nor Master Botkin’s.

“It does,” Togtuun agreed. “Tell me what you know.”

“So you can tell me if I am right?” Alina said.

“So we can make the next leap,” Togtuun said. Their face was so serious, so open and unreadable, the wisdom that of the ancient fern and its freshest, furred fiddlehead. “It wasn’t only General Kirigan who has needed you for a time beyond time, Starkova Kirigana.”

“I hardly think you need me to solve the mysteries of merzost,” Alina said.

“You’re the only one who has questioned Morozova’s texts since the Little Palace was founded,” Togtuun said. “Most of the Grisha quail at the least mention of merzost.”

“That seems, well, foolish,” Alina replied.

“The *otkazat’sya* do not have a monopoly on folly. And the Shadow Summoner has impressed upon the younglings that they risk the gravest harm to themselves and their fellows should they peer into the abyss,” Togtuun said.

“‘Peer into the abyss?’ That has got to be a direct quote from Aleksander,” Alina said, shaking her head in fond exasperation. “He can be so dramatic, I think sometimes he’s really missed his calling and he should be writing three-act plays for the Imperial Theater and shouting at the lead actress that she has to put more feeling into her monologue. Simply exploring whether the theorems about merzost are valid isn’t dangerous. It’s more dangerous not to, to just accept that whatever Ilya Morozova wrote was sufficient and correct. And it wasn’t as if there aren’t other people who considered the possibilities.”

“No one reads those books and treatises,” Togtuun said. “A very few have begun and none have finished. I had hopes of Kostyk, but his small Science has compelled him elsewhere.”

“I think David has some idea. About merzost and that we’re wrong about it,” Alina said.

“Perhaps. He knows Kirigan would not listen to him though, not in the way he would need to be heard,” Togtuun said. “And he doesn’t trust me.”

“He doesn’t trust many people. Probably because Dame Baghra tortured him,” Alina said. She thought the Librarian might argue the choice of words, but evidently the one constant in the world was that everyone knew Dame Baghra to behave monstrously. Togtuun sighed, just a little, and Alina decided not to try and interpret the meaning behind that soft breath, softly released.

“You do, though. And now, you will trust me enough to tell me what you have discovered,” Togtuun said, making the words tremble between question and command. There was a trick to it that Alina wasn’t sure she would ever master herself.

“Morozova conceptualizes merzost in material terms, the power and the sacrifice needing to be balanced on a scale, as if he were bartering for a sack of flour with the miller,” Alina said. “There is only duality, good and evil, dark and light, whatever is taken must be paid for and the transaction, the act of payment itself, is inherently wrong. To desire is wrong, to fulfil desire is wrong, to be satisfied and whole an impossible state. I’d almost pity him if he hadn’t cocked everything up so terribly and caused such torment.”

“You mean in the Shadow Summoner,” Togtuun said.

“Aleksander, yes, of course, but he’s not the only one who’s suffered because of Morozova’s errors,” Alina said. “So many lost, so many incomplete. Such a waste—”

She broke off, aware that whatever she meant by the word would pale in comparison to the comrades and friends Togtuun had seen maimed or killed, exiled or enslaved, feeling impossibly young and far too authoritative. Togtuun saw it and as was their wont, exercised the most pragmatic mercy.

“What is right?” Togtuun asked. “If we agree Ilya Morozova was wrong, how should we understand merzost?”

“I think...I think understanding merzost is comprehending the incomprehensible. I know, that sounds specious and silly and anyone else would tell me it’s a load of Volcra shit, in varying degrees of politeness, but I think there is no direct way to understand merzost. It’s unfrontable...it requires you to occupy a liminal space, present and ephemeral, approaching and waiting. It’s about potential and how it can tip into being. And also, there is a tremendous amount of mathematics built into it,” Alina said. “I can’t emphasize that part enough, because I nearly went mad trying to get some of the equations to work out.”

“A pity Ninochka was not here sooner. She has a particular facility in that area, though few realize it,” Togtuun remarked, a bit of astonishing information shared casually, as though Alina would not remember that Togtuun was nearly always imperturbable but never casual,



never speaking without some greater purpose. She would not care to face Togtuun across the shatranj board.

“You said, once I told you what I’d learned, there could be a next leap.” Alina wouldn’t have referenced an abyss, but her sense of what lay ahead was indistinct, misty instead of dark, though dangers could easily hide within both obscurities. She’d only ever been a mediocre map-maker, but she still trusted a map, a bottle of ink, the squinting in the distance required for leagues and mountains, the key etched into the bottom left corner.

“Merzost may be used to serve our purposes,” Togtuun said.

“There’s a lot to unpack there,” Alina replied. “May and not can or will. Who is included in our—you and I alone, General Kirigan? The Grisha as a people or only those in the Little Palace? And what are our purposes? Do you mean to use merzost defeat Prince Nikolai and his coup?”

Togtuun laughed. There was delight in the sound and pride. Relief and trenchancy. And power, a power that came neither from light nor darkness, not from release or restraint, but owed something to the vastness of the ocean Alina had never seen herself and the space between notes in a chord.

“Nothing so little as an overthrown coup. We might change the world, Starkova Kirigana. But only if you will allow it. And that demands we work in secret, within silence. That liminal space you have discovered you create,” Togtuun said.

“In secret? You mean I have to lie to Aleksander,” Alina said.

“Shall we philosophize over omission and falsehood? I’m sure it would prove an interesting discussion, but there will be other costs,” Togtuun replied.

“He’d try to stop us. Me,” Alina said.

“Naturally,” Togtuun said. “Would you keep him from hurting himself, if you could?”

“I would. I have done, since he rescued me,” Alina said. “He makes it very hard though.”

“It would not be forever, I think. There would be a time when you could tell him. When we would need him,” Togtuun said.

“He will be very angry. Even if it’s not a long time,” Alina said, seeing his face, the bleak expression that would twist his lips. The way his shoulders would rise and his kefta billow, a second shadow meant to demonstrate his wrath, his need to be concealed.

“Less than you imagine,” Togtuun said. “And between you, there is a communion that cannot be compromised. He will know without knowing and once he realizes that, it will not be a matter of forgiveness, but only wonder.”

“Only wonder? Aleksander is not capable of unalloyed marveling,” Alina said.

“You haven’t seen him watch you when you Summon,” Togtuun said. “Or when you laugh.”

It came to Alina that perhaps Togtuun was, among many other things, a Heartrender, but one who worked not directly upon flesh, their aim unerring, unsparing.

“You said nothing as little as an overthrown coup. But that would be included, right?” Alina asked. “We would remove Prince Nikolai as a current and future threat.” She didn’t specify what remove meant and Togtuun wouldn’t ask for clarification.

“You won’t care about something so small if we succeed,” Togtuun said.

“I’ll always care about something small. I’ve been little all my life and I know not to underestimate small things,” Alina replied.

“Like lentils,” Togtuun said, fluttering the fingers of their left hand in a way that recalled the spill of the beans, the ticking they made against each other like seconds passing.

“If I ever become a Sankta, I guess that’s what I’ll be the patron saint of. Lentils and other small things,” Alina said. “How Aleksander will crow over that!”

He was asleep when she returned to their rooms. She’d come back much later than she had intended when she’d left to go to the Library but it was earlier than he usually fell asleep. Alina could count on one hand the number of times she’d found him dozing in his armchair by the fire. In retrospect, it was an indication of how grievously wounded he’d been that he’d slept so long and deeply when they were in the woods; she suspected even the cabin’s utter remoteness wouldn’t have allowed him to relax enough to keep him from standing watch over her every night. To see him now, his head tucked against the wing of the chair, his bare feet propped up on the flocked velvet hassock he’d first called an *abominable Imperial affectation* before claiming it, almost made her second-guess her decision. She could wake him and guide him to their bed or go about her own nightly ritual and wait for him to rouse to the sound of the water poured into the bowl, the jeweled hairpins dropped into their silver casket. The fire danced in the hearth, drift-wood brought from the harbor at Os Kervo burning violet and aquamarine. The light flickered across his cheekbones, the line of his throat, his kefta unfastened, the linen shirt beneath unbuttoned far enough the faint scar above his heart was visible through the scattering of his chest hair. It was rare for him to permit himself such license, rarer still for her to observe it, and she wished it could only be a night she remembered for this moment, this tender, exquisite peace and the look of drowsy desire his dark eyes would hold when he opened them and saw her in front of him.

She wasn’t sure it would work. She couldn’t be sure. If it didn’t, she wouldn’t have to explain anything; she could wait a hundred years before she mentioned it to him, an anecdote shared over honey-cakes and tea, the time leaching any bitterness from the action. And if it did work, if it exceeded her wildest hopes (not her dreams, because she would never have dreamt of this for them), she would say, in all truthfulness, that she hadn’t been certain of what would happen, other than that the risk she took was for herself alone and he couldn’t take her to task for that. Plausible deniability, that was how Togtuun had framed it, head tilted to one side, evidently prepared for Alina’s response,

“Plausible deniability. Yes, that’ll be about as convincing to Aleksander as me wishing for a herring syllabub.”

There hadn’t been any rejoinder, though Togtuun had grimaced, properly, at the prospect of such a repulsive dessert. And so Alina crept onto Aleksander’s lap, nestling her face against his neck, feeling his arms come around her even as he slept. She took a long breath and thought and chose.

“Sashenka *mrinyk, minii oyuun ukhaan tany khüich chadald tавtai moril,*” she said, striving to match Togtuun’s inflections in the incantation. Her attempt would have had no chance of working at all, save that Aleksander was an amplifier, perhaps the most formidable amplifier living, and her husband, who had already pledged himself to her, in every regard and dimension.

When the Librarian had uttered the words, Alina had first laughed, remarking *This is why the drüskelle call us witches*. Togtuun had answered *And this is why you do not know the name of my Small Science*.

Aleksander stirred beneath her and she pressed her lips to the delicate skin of his throat. He murmured something incomprehensible, likely in Ravkan so old she couldn’t recognize the words. Alina closed her eyes and turned inward, where it was not dark, nor light, but only a place between and then she sent herself forth as she would Summon and waited to find out if Aleksander would answer and how.

Across the city, Prince Nikolai sat at his gilded desk, candles lighting the room to the brightness of a summer noon. He signed his name to the last page before him, cast a glance at the papers strewn about the floor. He shrugged and leaned back. Success was never assured, but he felt it, near as a stalking beast about to strike.

## Chapter 30

“Plausible deniability? *Plausible deniability*, Alina?” Aleksander said, his voice tight and the utter absence of any nickname or endearment was not lost upon her but she knew enough not to begin with anything resembling an apology.

“Yes, those are the two words I just said, Sasha,” she replied, a little exasperated in spite of her resolve to remain calm. He’d been going on and on for the past half hour, hardly taking a breath. “I’m not sure if you are more offended by the former or the latter. You’ve made it clear you are offended. I believe they could tell that in Weddle. Perhaps on the Moon.”

“I am not offended, I am aghast,” he said. He was paler than he ought to be and she worried over it. It might have nothing to do with what had happened between them, he might have made do with a roll and a glass of tea instead of a proper dinner; he often did if they did not sit down for the evening meal together. He might have visited with his mother, which always left him drained. But it might be a consequence, unanticipated, of what had happened in the night or simply his anger. “You had no right—”

“It wasn’t as if I forced a bloody collar on you!” Alina retorted. “Nothing could happen unless you allowed it to, we made sure of that, before I agreed to try.”

“I’m angry you risked yourself, *umnaya*. You risked your life,” he said, breaking off, turning his face away from her.

“Not my life,” she said. “I told you, I explained.”

“I stand corrected. You didn’t risk your life, only your mind,” he said. “If you had been hurt, your mind damaged, I cannot, how could I—”

“But I’m fine. Perfectly fine. We can’t get bogged down in hypothetical scenarios that never happened and won’t ever happen,” Alina said, reaching out a hand to lay on his. He was trembling and she felt sick, the way she had felt all the time before they’d met and he’d revealed who she was. They were both quiet for a moment, turning their palms towards each other, the gesture a small communion, her Light and his Shadow matched as gloves.

“This entire situation was a hypothetical you allowed yourself to be immersed in,” he said. He sounded steadier, less incensed, with a hint of resignation like the bass note of a perfume. “I’d blame Togtuun except I know you won’t allow that, will see it as me making you a pawn when you are a queen.”

“Togtuun wouldn’t allow it either, though they’d probably only let you rant for a bit and then explain,” Alina said. “When we’re done with this, maybe you can tell me more about Togtuun and just exactly how they came to be here. What the deal is between the two of you, because I don’t get it.”

“When we’re *done* with this?”

“I didn’t say it would take five minutes,” Alina replied. He smiled then and pulled her close to him, bending his head to drop a kiss at her crown, holding her tucked against him with a warmth more sustaining than the flare of passion, desire distant for both of them, though it would only be a moment’s work to make their embrace one of striving possession.

“I understand why you did what you did,” he murmured. “I would have said no, categorically, if you’d asked and I have done as you did. It has been a long time since I was the one who was not the leader, I am not yet adept at trusting, though I trust you more than anyone. I have not been able to question fundamental truths, or what I took them to be, for so long. Perhaps too long, but the world has gone on and I was alone—I had to accept certain things as right, or I would have doomed all the Grisha.”

“So you forgive me?” she said.

“No, of course not,” he said. “Because you don’t need to be forgiven. Because I am not the one to grant anyone forgiveness. Because, as you say, you were successful.”

“I hoped I would be. I thought I could be, we thought so,” she said.

“The question is how—to what degree, to what extent and to what unexpected consequence?” he said. “I’ve learned that and Togtuun knows it as well, that when you succeed, there are always complications. They aren’t always bad, but you have to deal with them. David probably understands better than anyone else, as he’s the most inventive Durast in seven generations. You might speak with him later.”

“Later?” she said.

“You cannot think I will let you go now,” he replied softly, his lips now at her temple, her cheek, his hands stroking along her ribs and down to her hips. “You and I, we must explore what you have done. We must make a new map of the world, my cartographer.”

“I’m not sure this is the most effective method, Sasha,” she said.

“I’m not either, but I can’t think of any other way,” he said.

“Can’t you?” she asked. “Have you tried? Before, there was the purl between us, but now... have you tried to see if there is anything more? I have an idea, but it’s really only a hypothesis and those need to be tested.”

“Plausible deniability?” Genya’s face was the picture of disbelief, utterly untailored, and quite like a dash of cold water. “And he accepted it? You truly said that to him, Alina? To General Kirigan?”

“Accepted is maybe not the word I would choose, but yes, it’s what I said to him. It’s not a lie,” Alina said. “I wasn’t trying to purposely deceive him.”

“I’m not sure what it is—it’s not an explanation and it’s a piss-poor excuse, if you’ll pardon me,” Genya said. “Speaking as someone with experience in spying.”

“This wasn’t espionage, Genya,” Alina said.

“No, it wasn’t. Because that assumes opposition and General Kirigan is yours in every way a person can be,” Genya said.

“You’re talking about this like I betrayed him. It’s not like I told him I was going to, I don’t know, use an amplifier to take control of his Summoning. It was an offer, one he was able to refuse,” Alina said. She nudged the tray of pastries towards Genya, an illustration amply rewards when Genya shook her head to decline; Alina picked up the cake closest to herself, a golden seedcake topped with currants and took a bite.

“I suppose that’s true if you accept that the sleeping mind and the waking mind are the same self,” Genya said reflectively. “Did you and the Librarian come to terms with that? Because it seems like you had a lot of ground to cover, what with the creation of an entirely novel endeavor to reconceptualize merzost so that it could become a tool used to liberate the Grisha that you could get functioning before breakfast the next morning, when General Kirigan’s absence would be noted and cause a lot of consternation at the very least.”

“We didn’t really talk about that,” Alina admitted. “I didn’t, anyway. The Librarian has abilities that are hard to grasp, they seem to have some skill in manipulating thought and dreams the way other Grisha handle matter or energy.”

“Doesn’t that give you pause?”

“Perhaps not as much as it should, but the Librarian was here for a long time before I arrived and they could only have been invited by Aleksander, kept here by Aleksander. If they posed such a terrible risk, he would have known. If I trust him in the most important ways, and I do, I think I have to trust him to have decided the Librarian is our ally, even if we aren’t always clear how what they are doing furthers our cause,” Alina said. “And, in the most basic terms, we’re all still alive and kicking today and Aleksander had plenty of energy available to take me to task for risking myself, so as far as we know, no harm done.”

“I wouldn’t think that would be enough for you,” Genya said.

“You weren’t with us in the woods. No one was,” Alina said. “Nor when the Fjerdans tried to murder me. I’ve felt what it’s like when Aleksander is consumed by anger and fear, how much it takes to keep him from losing himself. I know what it feels like to steady each other, I can feel when something between us is good, whole. When the possibilities are like flowers about to bloom, not adders ready to strike. That’s how it felt, that’s how it feels now.”

Genya reached over and picked up a tiny cake topped with a dollop of whipped cream and a trio of tart red berries and popped the entire thing into her mouth. She licked away the cream that she got on her fingers, and smiled at Alina.

“That’s all right then. Though you make me feel I should never doze off in the Library ever again.”

“I haven’t heard anyone ever complain about having a nightmare when they do,” Alina said. “It might be the safest place in all Ravka to fall asleep if you’re scared of a bad dream.”

“I’ve never had a dream worse than being awake,” Genya said. “It never occurred to me that the Librarian might have had a hand in that. But if that’s why, I can see why General Kirigan would do nearly anything to keep them here.”

“Plausible deniability,” Ivan said, his arms crossed, his gaze steady, his usual expression as if they were talking about something ordinary. “He did not like it but you made him listen.”

“Yes,” Alina said. She’d given herself even odds that this would be Ivan’s response, a practical assessment of the choice and the outcome, much as she might describe a shatranj gambit to one of the younglings with an aptitude or interest in the game. She’d been braced for outrage, the cold, suffocating kind that Aleksander seemed incapable of, a brutal dismissal that had no flourishes of the kefta or curled lip, but it seemed she’d come out on the better side of the split.

“The Librarian knows you well,” he said. “To make a suggestion to you that you would take, one you would see as a reasonable risk.”

“You don’t worry about the Librarian, do you?” Alina said.

“No. They have had ample opportunity to overthrow the General. They are an ally, though there have been times I’ve wondered if they held back when we could have used support,” Ivan said. “But it seems they have acted when they judged fit, and I can’t hold that against them when I’ve done the same.”

“I must say, this is a refreshing reaction,” Alina replied. “Not that I don’t love philosophical discussions about the nature of the self, mind-body duality, the inherent corruption of power, and so on. But it’s nice to come at things from a different angle. Though, you’re not just saying what you’re saying because you promised to make up for trying to kill me, are you?”

“No. I am willing to sacrifice my life for yours, not my scruples,” Ivan said. “However few or small you think mine are.”

“I don’t think you don’t have *any*,” Alina said quickly.

“What a relief,” he replied and then shocked her with a short, barking laugh. Alina wouldn’t have thought he had an infectious laugh, but she found herself chuckling, a little giddy, the way she felt after drinking medovudkha.

“It wasn’t so bad, plausible deniability or not, right?” she said. “We had to try, to see if what I discovered about merzost was true and there was only one way to do it.”

“Was there only one?” Ivan asked. He was the only one who’d thought to ask her that, which was probably the reason she’d sought him out to talk about what she’d done, no matter what she told anyone else about security concerns.

“I think so. I couldn’t afford to spend hours and days trying to figure out if there was another way when I had one that looked extremely likely to work. It’s not like there’s time to waste

with Nikolai plotting away and the intel from Matthias about the Fjerdans isn't reassuring," she said.

"You don't call him Prince Nikolai," Ivan observed.

"He doesn't deserve it," Alina answered. "And he's just a man, an *otkazat'sya*."

"You've come far from that orphanage at Keramzin," Ivan said, the approval apparent in his voice. Or, at least, it was apparent to Alina now that she had learned to distinguish the tiny increments of difference in tone that were easily overlooked. She shrugged and he made a low sound in his throat that was almost like a smile. She wished she could tell Aleksander about this, how delighted she'd made Ivan, Ivan of all people, by her behavior and her explanations, but Aleksander wouldn't see the humor in it and the satisfaction, not now, not when they had so recently found each other in the other world within the night and he was still grappling with being fundamentally wrong about *merzost* in a way that had cost lives.

"It seems like forever ago and then someone says something, some Os Altan proverb I've never heard before, or talks about some cultural reference I have no idea about, and it's like I just got onto the First Army wagonette and I'm wishing I'd been willing to be the nurserymaid instead of signing up as a mapmaker," Alina said.

"You, the nurserymaid?" Ivan said. "At an orphanage?"

"You think I couldn't have done it?" She didn't think she could have done it, not really, which was why she'd joined the First Army, besides her ill-advised juvenile yearning for Mal, but for Ivan to cast aspersions...

"I think it would have been a colossal waste. Unless you meant to train a team to compete in the national *shatranj* tournament," he said.

"That would have been a funny way to end up in Os Alta," Alina said.

"Stranger things have happened," Ivan replied. "Some of the youngling have tales to tell that you wouldn't believe if you read them in the *Princess and the Barbarian*. For the Grisha, the unexpected is as regular as an egg."

"See, that's what I mean. 'Regular as an egg,'" Alina grinned. "No one says that where I'm from. I think I ate one egg a year, if I got lucky."

"And does it make you wish to mind a nursery full of snotty-nosed orphans?" Ivan asked. "Or do you want an omelet? I believe that is one of the General's specialties."

"Ivan, has anyone noticed how funny you are?" Alina laughed. "Besides Fedyor?"

"No. It is a secret weapon I keep in reserve," he said, completely deadpan.

"Perhaps you can quip Nikolai into exile," she said.

"Exile is insufficient—he's been eliminated," Ivan said. Alina gaped at him, aware her mouth was hanging open. She must have misheard him, began to say as much when Ivan spoke



again. “I did not have to resort to humor.”

“What? I don’t—Ivan, what happened, what do you mean?”

“If you truly wish for me to tell you, I will. But I warn you, you will not like it, what I say, what I have done, and I would spare you that. You will have enough burdens to bear,” Ivan said.

“Does Aleksander know?” she said.

“He is my General, I do nothing without his knowledge,” Ivan said.

“And nothing that is not at his command?” she said and then something odd happened. Ivan’s face changed, the expression in his eyes one she couldn’t name, a muscle working in his jaw, his lips suddenly mobile. If he looked in a mirror, he might not recognize himself; she hardly did.

“He has been clear about his goals, his principles. What may be sacrificed, what costs may be borne and by whom,” Ivan said. “I am as his right hand, he need not instruct me to strike for it to be done, as he need not speak to his palm to wield a sword.”

“He uses the Cut,” Alina said. “He used it to save my life. It nearly killed him.”

“Just so, Alina,” Ivan said. It was the first time he had ever used her first name. “He knows what he needs. Will you trust that and trust that I am telling you what you need to know?”

“You’re not my right hand,” she said.

“No, I am sworn to you. Did you not have such relationships in the First Army? Were there not comrades you would have acted to save, if you could, not that boy from your orphanage, but your fellows, your seniors?” he said. She closed her eyes and saw Alexei’s face again, intent as he drew the course of a river on a map, the line of his neck when he lay broken after the crossing.

“Yes,” she said. “You’re sure, Nikolai can’t return, can’t be a martyr some faction rallies around, setting up a satellite court in Kerch, rallying a militia.”

“All those would have been better plans than the one he devised. I’m sure he will not pose a future problem, as sure as you are when you summon Light,” he said.

“All right,” Alina said, then shrugged. “I guess we won’t have to see whether merzost would have taken care of him.”

“He left a lot of documents. Sloppy,” Ivan offered. “We were going to burn most of them, but you’re welcome to try merzost instead. Fire will always be a back-up option.”

“Plausible deniability?” Nina laughed, a bold, raucous sound that made Alina question how effective Nina could be as a spy, but she couldn’t help chuckling along. Nina pushed over the

plate of waffles she'd been working her way through.

"I don't—" Alina said.

"You deserve them. If you knew me better, you would know what a big deal this kind of gesture is for me, but you've given me something better than fresh waffles with plum compote," Nina said.

"What's that?"

"A real laugh. And the sense that we might actually make it through all of this and come out the other side better off than we were before," Nina said. "For that, you should get waffles. Not all the waffles, but some and these are an especially good batch."

## End Notes

Title is from Rumi.

I wanted to try out the "there was only one bed" that Nina and Matthias got to use with Alina and Aleksander.

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